COLLECTED POEMS OF H. D.

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Collected Poems

H. D.

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SIXTH PRINTING

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SEA GARDEN

SEA GARDEN

SEA ROSE

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,

more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

Stunted, with small leaf,
you are flung on the sand,
you are lifted
in the crisp sand
that drives in the wind.

Can the spice-rose
drip such acrid fragrance
hardened in a leaf?

THE HELMSMAN

O BE swift—
we have always known you wanted us.

We fled inland with our flocks,
we pastured them in hollows,
cut off from the wind
and the salt track of the marsh.

We worshipped inland—
we stepped past wood-flowers,
we forgot your tang,
we brushed wood-grass.

We wandered from pine-hills
through oak and scrub-oak tangles,
we broke hyssop and bramble,
we caught flower and new bramble-fruit
in our hair: we laughed
as each branch whipped back,
we tore our feet in half buried rocks
and knotted roots and acorn-cups.

We forgot—we worshipped,
we parted green from green,

we sought further thickets,
we dipped our ankles
through leaf-mould and earth,
and wood and wood-bank enchanted us—

and the feel of the clefts in the bark,
and the slope between tree and tree—
and a slender path strung field to field
and wood to wood
and hill to hill
and the forest after it.

We forgot—for a moment
tree-resin, tree-bark,
sweat of a torn branch
were sweet to the taste.

We were enchanted with the fields,
the tufts of coarse grass
in the shorter grass—
we loved all this.

But now, our boat climbs—hesitates—
drops—
climbs—hesitates—crawls back—
climbs—hesitates—
O be swift—
we have always known you wanted us.

THE SHRINE

("SHE WATCHES OVER THE SEA")

I

ARE your rocks shelter for ships—
have you sent galleys from your beach,
are you graded—a safe crescent—
where the tide lifts them back to port—
are you full and sweet,
tempting the quiet
to depart in their trading ships?

Nay, you are great, fierce, evil—
you are the land-blight—
you have tempted men
but they perished on your cliffs.

Your lights are but dank shoals,
slate and pebble and wet shells
and seaweed fastened to the rocks.

It was evil—evil
when they found you,

when the quiet men looked at you—
they sought a headland
shaded with ledge of cliff
from the wind-blast.

But you—you are unsheltered,
cut with the weight of wind—
you shudder when it strikes,
then lift, swelled with the blast—
you sink as the tide sinks,
you shrill under hail, and sound
thunder when thunder sounds.

You are useless—
when the tides swirl
your boulders cut and wreck
the staggering ships.

II

You are useless,
O grave, O beautiful,
the landsmen tell it—I have heard—
you are useless.

And the wind sounds with this
and the sea
where rollers shot with blue
cut under deeper blue.

O but stay tender, enchanted
where wave-lengths cut you
apart from all the rest—
for we have found you,
we watch the splendour of you,
we thread throat on throat of freesia
for your shelf.

You are not forgot,
O plunder of lilies,
honey is not more sweet
than the salt stretch of your beach.

III

Stay—stay—
but terror has caught us now,
we passed the men in ships,
we dared deeper than the fisher-folk
and you strike us with terror
O bright shaft.

Flame passes under us
and sparks that unknot the flesh,
sorrow, splitting bone from bone,
splendour athwart our eyes
and rifts in the splendour,
sparks and scattered light.

Many warned of this,
men said:
there are wrecks on the fore-beach,
wind will beat your ship,
there is no shelter in that headland,
it is useless waste, that edge,
that front of rock—
sea-gulls clang beyond the breakers,
none venture to that spot.

IV

But hail—
as the tide slackens,
as the wind beats out,
we hail this shore—
we sing to you,
spirit between the headlands
and the further rocks.

Though oak-beams split,
though boats and sea-men flounder,
and the strait grind sand with sand
and cut boulders to sand and drift—

your eyes have pardoned our faults,
your hands have touched us—
you have leaned forward a little
and the waves can never thrust us back
from the splendour of your ragged coast.

MID-DAY

THE light beats upon me.
I am startled—
a split leaf crackles on the paved floor—
I am anguished—defeated.

A slight wind shakes the seed-pods—
my thoughts are spent
as the black seeds.
My thoughts tear me,
I dread their fever.
I am scattered in its whirl.
I am scattered like
the hot shrivelled seeds.

The shrivelled seeds
are split on the path—
the grass bends with dust,
the grape slips
under its crackled leaf:
yet far beyond the spent seed-pods,
and the blackened stalks of mint,
the poplar is bright on the hill,

the poplar spreads out,
deep-rooted among trees.

O poplar, you are great
among the hill-stones,
while I perish on the path
among the crevices of the rocks.

PURSUIT

WHAT do I care
that the stream is trampled,
the sand on the stream-bank
still holds the print of your foot:
the heel is cut deep.
I see another mark
on the grass ridge of the bank—
it points toward the wood-path.
I have lost the third
in the packed earth.

But here
a wild-hyacinth stalk is snapped:
the purple buds—half ripe—
show deep purple
where your heel pressed.

A patch of flowering grass,
low, trailing—
you brushed this:
the green stems show yellow-green
where you lifted—turned the earth-side

to the light:
this and a dead leaf-spine,
split across,
show where you passed.

You were swift, swift!
here the forest ledge slopes—
rain has furrowed the roots.
Your hand caught at this;
the root snapped under your weight.

I can almost follow the note
where it touched this slender tree
and the next answered—
and the next.

And you climbed yet further!
you stopped by the dwarf-cornel—
whirled on your heels,
doubled on your track.

This is clear—
you fell on the downward slope,
you dragged a bruised thigh—you limped—
you clutched this larch.

Did your head, bent back,
search further—
clear through the green leaf-moss
of the larch branches?

Did you clutch,
stammer with short breath and gasp:
wood-daemons grant life—
give life—I am almost lost.

For some wood-daemon
has lightened your steps.
I can find no trace of you
in the larch-cones and the underbrush.

THE CONTEST

I

YOUR stature is modelled
with straight tool-edge:
you are chiselled like rocks
that are eaten into by the sea.

With the turn and grasp of your wrist
and the chords' stretch,
there is a glint like worn brass.

The ridge of your breast is taut,
and under each the shadow is sharp,
and between the clenched muscles
of your slender hips.

From the circle of your cropped hair
there is light,
and about your male torso
and the foot-arch and the straight ankle.

II

You stand rigid and mighty—
granite and the ore in rocks;

a great band clasps your forehead
and its heavy twists of gold.

You are white—a limb of cypress
bent under a weight of snow.

You are splendid,
your arms are fire;
you have entered the hill-straits—
a sea treads upon the hill-slopes.

III

Myrtle is about your head,
you have bent and caught the spray:
each leaf is sharp
against the lift and furrow
of your bound hair.

The narcissus has copied the arch
of your slight breast:
your feet are citron-flowers,
your knees, cut from white-ash,
your thighs are rock-cistus.

Your chin lifts straight
from the hollow of your curved throat.
your shoulders are level—
they have melted rare silver
for their breadth.

SEA LILY

Reed,
slashed and torn
but doubly rich—
such great heads as yours
drift upon temple-steps,
but you are shattered
in the wind.

Myrtle-bark
is flecked from you,
scales are dashed
from your stem,
sand cuts your petal,
furrows it with hard edge,
like flint
on a bright stone.

Yet though the whole wind
slash at your bark,
you are lifted up,
aye—though it hiss
to cover you with froth.

THE WIND SLEEPERS

WHITER
than the crust
left by the tide,
we are stung by the hurled sand
and the broken shells.

We no longer sleep
in the wind—
we awoke and fled
through the city gate.

Tear—
tear us an altar,
tug at the cliff-boulders,
pile them with the rough stones—
we no longer
sleep in the wind,
propitiate us.

Chant in a wail
that never halts,
pace a circle and pay tribute
with a song.

When the roar of a dropped wave
breaks into it,
pour meted words
of sea-hawks and gulls
and sea-birds that cry
discords.

THE GIFT

INSTEAD of pearls—a wrought clasp—
a bracelet—will you accept this?

You know the script—
you will start, wonder:
what is left, what phrase
after last night? This:

The world is yet unspoiled for you,
you wait, expectant—
you are like the children
who haunt your own steps
for chance bits—a comb
that may have slipped,
a gold tassel, unravelled,
plucked from your scarf,
twirled by your slight fingers
into the street—
a flower dropped.

Do not think me unaware,
I who have snatched at you
as the street-child clutched

at the seed-pearls you spilt
that hot day
when your necklace snapped.

Do not dream that I speak
as one defrauded of delight,
sick, shaken by each heart-beat
or paralyzed, stretched at length,
who gasps:
these ripe pears
are bitter to the taste,
this spiced wine, poison, corrupt.
I cannot walk—
who would walk?
Life is a scavenger's pit—I escape—
I only, rejecting it,
lying here on this couch.

Your garden sloped to the beach,
myrtle overran the paths,
honey and amber flecked each leaf,
the citron-lily head—
one among many—
weighed there, over-sweet.

The myrrh-hyacinth
spread across low slopes,
violets streaked black ridges
through the grass.

The house, too, was like this,
over painted, over lovely—
the world is like this.

Sleepless nights,
I remember the initiates,
their gesture, their calm glance.
I have heard how in rapt thought,
in vision, they speak
with another race,
more beautiful, more intense than this.
I could laugh—
more beautiful, more intense?

Perhaps that other life
is contrast always to this.
I reason:
I have lived as they
in their inmost rites—
they endure the tense nerves
through the moment of ritual.
I endure from moment to moment—
days pass all alike,
tortured, intense.

This I forgot last night:
you must not be blamed,
it is not your fault;
as a child, a flower—any flower

tore my breast—
meadow-chicory, a common grass-tip,
a leaf shadow, a flower tint
unexpected on a winter-branch.

I reason:
another life holds what this lacks,
a sea, unmoving, quiet—
not forcing our strength
to rise to it, beat on beat—
a stretch of sand,
no garden beyond, strangling
with its myrrh-lilies—
a hill, not set with black violets
but stones, stones, bare rocks,
dwarf-trees, twisted, no beauty
to distract—to crowd
madness upon madness.

Only a still place
and perhaps some outer horror
some hideousness to stamp beauty,
a mark—no changing it now—
on our hearts.

I send no string of pearls,
no bracelet—accept this.

EVENING

THE light passes
from ridge to ridge,
from flower to flower—
the hypaticas, wide-spread
under the light
grow faint—
the petals reach inward,
the blue tips bend
toward the bluer heart
and the flowers are lost.

The cornel-buds are still white,
but shadows dart
from the cornel-roots—
black creeps from root to root,
each leaf
cuts another leaf on the grass,
shadow seeks shadow,
then both leaf
and leaf-shadow are lost.

SHELTERED GARDEN

I HAVE had enough.
I gasp for breath.

Every way ends, every road,
every foot-path leads at last
to the hill-crest—
then you retrace your steps,
or find the same slope on the other side,
precipitate.

I have had enough—
border-pinks, clove-pinks, wax-lilies,
herbs, sweet-cress.

O for some sharp swish of a branch—
there is no scent of resin
in this place,
no taste of bark, of coarse weeds,
aromatic, astringent—
only border on border of scented pinks.

Have you seen fruit under cover
that wanted light—

pears wadded in cloth,
protected from the frost,
melons, almost ripe,
smothered in straw?

Why not let the pears cling
to the empty branch?
All your coaxing will only make
a bitter fruit—
let them cling, ripen of themselves,
test their own worth,
nipped, shrivelled by the frost,
to fall at last but fair
with a russet coat.

Or the melon—
let it bleach yellow
in the winter light,
even tart to the taste—
it is better to taste of frost—
the exquisite frost—
than of wadding and of dead grass.

For this beauty,
beauty without strength,
chokes out life.
I want wind to break,
scatter these pink-stalks,
snap off their spiced heads,

fling them about with dead leaves—
spread the paths with twigs,
limbs broken off,
trail great pine branches,
hurled from some far wood
right across the melon-patch,
break pear and quince—
leave half-trees, torn, twisted
but showing the fight was valiant.

O to blot out this garden
to forget, to find a new beauty
in some terrible
wind-tortured place.

SEA POPPIES

Amber husk
fluted with gold,
fruit on the sand
marked with a rich grain,

treasure
spilled near the shrub-pines
to bleach on the boulders:

your stalk has caught root
among wet pebbles
and drift flung by the sea
and grated shells
and split conch-shells.

Beautiful, wide-spread,
fire upon leaf,
what meadow yields
so fragrant a leaf
as your bright leaf?

LOSS

THE sea called—
you faced the estuary,
you were drowned as the tide passed.—
I am glad of this—
at least you have escaped.

The heavy sea-mist stifles me.
I choke with each breath—
a curious peril, this—
the gods have invented
curious torture for us.

One of us, pierced in the flank,
dragged himself across the marsh,
he tore at the bay-roots,
lost hold on the crumbling bank—

Another crawled—too late—
for shelter under the cliffs.

I am glad the tide swept you out,
O beloved,

you of all this ghastly host
alone untouched,
your white flesh covered with salt
as with myrrh and burnt iris.

We were hemmed in this place,
so few of us, so few of us to fight
their sure lances,
the straight thrust—effortless
with slight life of muscle and shoulder.

So straight—only we were left,
the four of us—somehow shut off.
And the marsh dragged one back,
and another perished under the cliff,
and the tide swept you out.

Your feet cut steel on the paths,
I followed for the strength
of life and grasp.
I have seen beautiful feet
but never beauty welded with strength.
I marvelled at your height.

You stood almost level
with the lance-bearers
and so slight.

And I wondered as you clasped
your shoulder-strap
at the strength of your wrist
and the turn of your young fingers,
and the lift of your shorn locks,
and the bronze
of your sun-burnt neck.

All of this,
and the curious knee-cap,
fitted above the wrought greaves,
and the sharp muscles of your back
which the tunic could not cover—
the outline
no garment could deface.

I wonder if you knew how I watched,
how I crowded before the spearsmen—
but the gods wanted you,
the gods wanted you back.

HUNTRESS

COME, blunt your spear with us,
our pace is hot
and our bare heels
in the heel-prints—
we stand tense—do you see—
are you already beaten
by the chase?

We lead the pace
for the wind on the hills,
the low hill is spattered
with loose earth—
our feet cut into the crust
as with spears.

We climbed the ploughed land,
dragged the seed from the clefts,
broke the clods with our heels,
whirled with a parched cry
into the woods:

Can you come,
can you come,

can you follow the hound trail,
can you trample the hot froth?

Spring up—sway forward—
follow the quickest one,
aye, though you leave the trail
and drop exhausted at our feet.

GARDEN

I

You are clear
O rose, cut in rock,
hard as the descent of hail.

I could scrape the colour
from the petals
like split dye from a rock.

If I could break you
I could break a tree.

If I could stir
I could break a tree—
I could break you.

II

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air—
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path.

SEA VIOLET

THE white violet
is scented on its stalk,
the sea-violet
fragile as agate,
lies fronting all the wind
among the torn shells
on the sand-bank.

The greater blue violets
flutter on the hill,
but who would change for these
who would change for these
one root of the white sort?

Violet
your grasp is frail
on the edge of the sand-hill,
but you catch the light—
frost, a star edges with its fire.

THE CLIFF TEMPLE

I

GREAT, bright portal,
shelf of rock,
rocks fitted in long ledges,
rocks fitted to dark, to silver granite,
to lighter rock—
clean cut, white against white.

High—high—and no hill-goat
tramples—no mountain-sheep
has set foot on your fine grass;
you lift, you are the world-edge,
pillar for the sky-arch.

The world heaved—
we are next to the sky:
over us, sea-hawks shout,
gulls sweep past—
the terrible breakers are silent
from this place.

Below us, on the rock-edge,
where earth is caught in the fissures

of the jagged cliff,
a small tree stiffens in the gale,
it bends—but its white flowers
are fragrant at this height.

And under and under,
the wind booms:
it whistles, it thunders,
it growls—it presses the grass
beneath its great feet.

II

I said:
for ever and for ever, must I follow you
through the stones?
I catch at you—you lurch:
you are quicker than my hand-grasp.

I wondered at you.
I shouted—dear—mysterious—beautiful—
white myrtle-flesh.

I was splintered and torn:
the hill-path mounted
swifter than my feet.

Could a daemon avenge this hurt,
I would cry to him—could a ghost,

I would shout—O evil,
follow this god,
taunt him with his evil and his vice.

III

Shall I hurl myself from here,
shall I leap and be nearer you?
Shall I drop, beloved, beloved,
ankle against ankle?
Would you pity me, O white breast?

If I woke, would you pity me,
would our eyes meet?

Have you heard,
do you know how I climbed this rock?
My breath caught, I lurched forward—
I stumbled in the ground-myrtle.

Have you heard, O god seated on the cliff,
how far toward the ledges of your house,
how far I had to walk?

IV

Over me the wind swirls.
I have stood on your portal
and I know—
you are further than this,
still further on another cliff.

ORCHARD

I saw the first pear
as it fell—
the honey-seeking, golden-banded,
the yellow swarm
was not more fleet than I,
(spare us from loveliness)
and I fell prostrate
crying:
you have flayed us
with your blossoms,
spare us the beauty
of fruit-trees.

The honey-seeking
paused not,
the air thundered their song,
and I alone was prostrate.

O rough-hewn
god of the orchard,
I bring you an offering—
do you, alone unbeautiful,

son of the god,
spare us from loveliness:

these fallen hazel-nuts,
stripped late of their green sheaths,
grapes, red-purple,
their berries
dripping with wine,
pomegranates already broken,
and shrunken figs
and quinces untouched,
I bring you as offering.

SEA GODS

I

THEY say there is no hope—
sand—drift—rocks—rubble of the sea—
the broken hulk of a ship,
hung with shreds of rope,
pallid under the cracked pitch.

they say there is no hope
to conjure you—
no whip of the tongue to anger you—
no hate of words
you must rise to refute.

They say you are twisted by the sea,
you are cut apart
by wave-break upon wave-break,
that you are misshapen by the sharp rocks,
broken by the rasp and after-rasp.

That you are cut, torn, mangled,
torn by the stress and beat,
no stronger than the strips of sand
along your ragged beach.

II

But we bring violets,
great masses—single, sweet,
wood-violets, stream-violets,
violets from a wet marsh.

Violets in clumps from hills,
tufts with earth at the roots,
violets tugged from rocks,
blue violets, moss, cliff, river-violets.

Yellow violets' gold,
burnt with a rare tint—
violets like red ash
among tufts of grass.

We bring deep-purple
bird-foot violets.

We bring the hyacinth-violet,
sweet, bare, chill to the touch—
and violets whiter than the in-rush
of your own white surf.

III

For you will come,
you will yet haunt men in ships,

you will trail across the fringe of strait
and circle the jagged rocks.

You will trail across the rocks
and wash them with your salt,
you will curl between sand-hills—
you will thunder along the cliff—
break—retreat—get fresh strength—
gather and pour weight upon the beach.

You will draw back,
and the ripple on the sand-shelf
will be witness of your track.
O privet-white, you will paint
the lintel of wet sand with froth.

You will bring myrrh-bark
and drift laurel-wood from hot coasts!
when you hurl high—high—
we will answer with a shout.

For you will come,
you will come,
you will answer our taut hearts,
you will break the lie of men's thoughts,
and cherish and shelter us.

ACON

I

Bear me to Dictaeus,
and to the steep slopes;
to the river Erymanthus.

I choose spray of dittany,
cyperum, frail of flower,
buds of myrrh,
all-healing herbs,
close pressed in calathes.

For she lies panting,
drawing sharp breath,
broken with harsh sobs,
she, Hyella,
whom no god pities.

II

Dryads
haunting the groves,
nereids

who dwell in wet caves,
for all the white leaves of olive-branch,
and early roses,
and ivy wreaths, woven gold berries,
which she once brought to your altars,
bear now ripe fruits from Arcadia,
and Assyrian wine
to shatter her fever.

The light of her face falls from its flower,
as a hyacinth,
hidden in a far valley,
perishes upon burnt grass.

Pales,
bring gifts,
bring your Phoenician stuffs,
and do you, fleet-footed nymphs,
bring offerings,
Illyrian iris,
and a branch of shrub,
and frail-headed poppies.

NIGHT

THE night has cut
each from each
and curled the petals
back from the stalk
and under it in crisp rows;

under at an unfaltering pace,
under till the rinds break,
back till each bent leaf
is parted from its stalk;

under at a grave pace,
under till the leaves
are bent back
till they drop upon earth,
back till they are all broken.

O night,
you take the petals
of the roses in your hand,
but leave the stark core
of the rose
to perish on the branch.

PRISONERS

It is strange that I should want
this sight of your face—
we have had so much:
at any moment now I may pass,
stand near the gate,
do not speak—
only reach if you can, your face
half-fronting the passage
toward the light.

Fate—God sends this as a mark,
a last token that we are not forgot,
lost in this turmoil,
about to be crushed out,
burned or stamped out
at best with sudden death.

The spearsman who brings this
will ask for the gold clasp
you wear under your coat.
I gave all I had left.

Press close to the portal,
my gate will soon clang
and your fellow wretches
will crowd to the entrance—
be first at the gate.

Ah beloved, do not speak.
I write this in great haste—
do not speak,
you may yet be released.

I am glad enough to depart
though I have never tasted life
as in these last weeks.

It is a strange life,
patterned in fire and letters
on the prison pavement.
If I glance up
it is written on the walls,
it is cut on the floor,
it is patterned across
the slope of the roof.

I am weak—weak—
last night if the guard
had left the gate unlocked
I could not have ventured to escape,
but one thought serves me now
with strength.

As I pass down the corridor
past desperate faces at each cell,
your eyes and my eyes may meet.

You will be dark, unkempt,
but I pray for one glimpse of your face—
why do I want this?
I who have seen you at the banquet
each flower of your hyacinth-circlet
white against your hair.

Why do I want this,
when even last night
you startled me from sleep?
You stood against the dark rock,
you grasped an elder staff.

So many nights
you have distracted me from terror.
Once you lifted a spear-flower.
I remember how you stooped
to gather it—
and it flamed, the leaf and shoot
and the threads, yellow, yellow—
sheer till they burnt
to red-purple in the cup.

As I pass your cell-door
do not speak.

I was first on the list—
they may forget you tried to shield me
as the horsemen passed.

STORM

You crash over the trees,
you crack the live branch—
the branch is white,
the green crushed,
each leaf is rent like split wood.

You burden the trees
with black drops,
you swirl and crash—
you have broken off a weighted leaf
in the wind,
it is hurled out,
whirls up and sinks,
a green stone.

SEA IRIS

I

Weed, moss-weed,
root tangled in sand,
sea-iris, brittle flower,
one petal like a shell
is broken,
and you print a shadow
like a thin twig.

Fortunate one,
scented and stinging,
rigid myrrh-bud,
camphor-flower,
sweet and salt—you are wind
in our nostrils.

II

Do the murex-fishers
drench you as they pass?
Do your roots drag up colour
from the sand?

Have they slipped gold under you—
rivets of gold?

Band of iris-flowers
above the waves,
you are painted blue,
painted like a fresh prow
stained among the salt weeds.

HERMES OF THE WAYS

THE hard sand breaks,
and the grains of it
are clear as wine.

Far off over the leagues of it,
the wind,
playing on the wide shore,
piles little ridges,
and the great waves
break over it.

But more than the many-foamed ways
of the sea,
I know him
of the triple path-ways,
Hermes,
who awaits.

Dubious,
facing three ways,
welcoming wayfarers,
he whom the sea-orchard
shelters from the west,

from the east
weathers sea-wind;
fronts the great dunes.

Wind rushes
over the dunes,
and the coarse, salt-crusted grass
answers.

Heu,
it whips round my ankles!

II

Small is
this white stream,
flowing below ground
from the poplar-shaded hill,
but the water is sweet.

Apples on the small trees
are hard,
too small,
too late ripened
by a desperate sun
that struggles through sea-mist.

The boughs of the trees
are twisted

by many bafflings;
twisted are
the small-leafed boughs.

But the shadow of them
is not the shadow of the mast head
nor of the torn sails.

Hermes, Hermes,
the great sea foamed,
gnashed its teeth about me;
but you have waited,
where sea-grass tangles with
shore-grass.

PEAR TREE

Silver dust
lifted from the earth,
higher than my arms reach,
you have mounted,
O silver,
higher than my arms reach
you front us with great mass;

no flower ever opened
so staunch a white leaf,
no flower ever parted silver
from such rare silver;

O white pear,
your flower-tufts
thick on the branch
bring summer and ripe fruits
in their purple hearts.

CITIES

CAN we believe—by an effort
comfort our hearts:
it is not waste all this,
not placed here in disgust,
street after street,
each patterned alike,
no grace to lighten
a single house of the hundred
crowded into one garden-space.

Crowded—can we believe,
not in utter disgust,
in ironical play—
but the maker of cities grew faint
with the beauty of temple
and space before temple,
arch upon perfect arch,
of pillars and corridors that led out
to strange court-yards and porches
where sun-light stamped
hyacinth-shadows
black on the pavement.

That the maker of cities grew faint
with the splendour of palaces,
paused while the incense-flowers
from the incense-trees
dropped on the marble-walk,
thought anew, fashioned this—
street after street alike.

For alas,
he had crowded the city so full
that men could not grasp beauty,
beauty was over them,
through them, about them,
no crevice unpacked with the honey,
rare, measureless.

So he built a new city,
ah can we believe, not ironically
but for new splendour
constructed new people
to lift through slow growth
to a beauty unrivalled yet—
and created new cells,
hideous first, hideous now—
spread larve across them,
not honey but seething life

And in these dark cells,
packed street after street,

souls live, hideous yet—
O disfigured, defaced,
with no trace of the beauty
men once held so light.

Can we think a few old cells
were left—we are left—
grains of honey,
old dust of stray pollen
dull on our torn wings,
we are left to recall the old streets?

Is our task the less sweet
that the larve still sleep in their cells?
Or crawl out to attack our frail strength:
You are useless. We live.
We await great events.
We are spread through this earth.
We protect our strong race.
You are useless.
Your cell takes the place
of our young future strength.

Though they sleep or wake to torment
and wish to displace our old cells—
thin rare gold—
that their larve grow fat—
is our task the less sweet?

Though we wander about,
find no honey of flowers in this waste,
is our task the less sweet—
who recall the old splendour,
await the new beauty of cities?

The city is peopled
with spirits, not ghosts, O my love:

Though they crowded between
and usurped the kiss of my mouth
their breath was your gift,
their beauty, your life.

THE GOD

THE GOD

I

I ASKED of your face:
is it dark,
set beneath heavy locks,
circled with stiff ivy-fruit,
clear,
cut with great hammer-stroke,
brow, nose and mouth,
mysterious and far distant
from my sense.

I asked:
can he from his portals of ebony
carved with grapes,
turn toward the earth?

I even spoke this blasphemy
in my thoughts:
the earth is evil,
given over to evil,
we are lost.

II

And in a moment
you have altered this;

beneath my feet, the rocks
have no weight
against the rush of cyclamen,
fire-tipped, ivory-pointed,
white;

beneath my feet the flat rocks
have no strength
against the deep purple flower-embers,
cyclamen, wine spilled.

III

As I stood among the bare rocks
where salt lay,
peeled and flaked
in its white drift,

I thought I would be the last
you would want,
I thought I would but scatter salt
on the ripe grapes.

I thought the vine-leaves
would curl under,

leaf and leaf-point
at my touch,

the yellow and green grapes
would have dropped,
my very glance must shatter
the purple fruit.

I had drawn away into the salt,
myself, a shell
emptied of life.

IV

I pluck the cyclamen,
red by wine-red,
and place the petals'
stiff ivory and bright fire
against my flesh;

now I am powerless
to draw back
for the sea is cyclamen-purple,
cylamen-red, colour of the last grapes,
colour of the purple of the flowers,
cyclamen-coloured and dark.

ADONIS

I

EACH of us like you
has died once,
each of us like you
has passed through drift of wood-leaves,
cracked and bent
and tortured and unbent
in the winter frost,
then burnt into gold points,
lighted afresh,
crisp amber, scales of gold-leaf,
gold turned and re-welded
in the sun-heat;

each of us like you
has died once,
each of us has crossed an old wood-path
and found the winter leaves
so golden in the sun-fire
that even the live wood-flowers
were dark.

II

Not the gold on the temple-front
where you stand,
is as gold as this,
not the gold that fastens your sandal,
nor the gold reft
through your chiselled locks
is as gold as this last year's leaf,
not all the gold hammered and wrought
and beaten
on your lover's face,
brow and bare breast
is as golden as this:

each of us like you
has died once,
each of us like you
stands apart, like you
fit to be worshipped.

PYGMALION

I

SHALL I let myself be caught
in my own light?
shall I let myself be broken
in my own heat?
or shall I cleft the rock as of old
and break my own fire
with its surface?

does this fire thwart me
and my craft,
or does my work cloud this light?
which is the god,
which is the stone
the god takes for his use?

II

Which am I,
the stone or the power
that lifts the rock from the earth?

am I the master of this fire,
is this fire my own strength?

am I master of this
swirl upon swirl of light?
have I made it as in old times
I made the gods from the rock?

have I made this fire from myself?
or is this arrogance?
is this fire a god
that seeks me in the dark?

III

I made image upon image for my use,
I made image upon image, for the grace
of Pallas was my flint
and my help was Hephaestos.

I made god upon god
step from the cold rock,
I made the gods less than men
for I was a man and they my work;

and now what is it that has come to pass?
for fire has shaken my hand,
my strivings are dust.

IV

Now what is it that has come to pass?
over my head, fire stands,
my marbles are alert:

each of the gods, perfect,
cries out from a perfect throat:
you are useless,
no marble can bind me,
no stone suggest.

V

They have melted into the light
and I am desolate;
they have melted;
each from his plinth,
each one departs;

they have gone;
what agony can express my grief?

each from his marble base
has stepped into the light
and my work is for naught.

VI

Now am I the power
that has made this fire

as of old I made the gods
start from the rocks?
am I the god?
or does this fire carve me
for its use?

EURYDICE

I

So you have swept me back,
I who could have walked with the live souls
above the earth,
I who could have slept among the live flowers
at last;

so for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness
I am swept back
where dead lichens drip
dead cinders upon moss of ash;

so for your arrogance
I am broken at last,
I who had lived unconscious,
who was almost forgot;

if you had let me wait
I had grown from listlessness
into peace,

if you had let me rest with the dead,
I had forgot you
and the past.

II

Here only flame upon flame
and black among the red sparks,
streaks of black and light
grown colourless;

why did you turn back,
that hell should be reinhabited
of myself thus
swept into nothingness?

why did you turn?
why did you glance back?
why did you hesitate for that moment?
why did you bend your face
caught with the flame of the upper earth,
above my face?

what was it that crossed my face
with the light from yours
and your glance?
what was it you saw in my face?
the light of your own face,
the fire of your own presence?

What had my face to offer
but reflex of the earth,
hyacinth colour
caught from the raw fissure in the rock
where the light struck,
and the colour of azure crocuses
and the bright surface of gold crocuses
and of the wind-flower,
swift in its veins as lightning
and as white.

III

Saffron from the fringe of the earth,
wild saffron that has bent
over the sharp edge of earth,
all the flowers that cut through the earth,
all, all the flowers are lost;

everything is lost,
everything is crossed with black,
black upon black
and worse than black,
this colourless light.

IV

Fringe upon fringe
of blue crocuses,

crocuses, walled against blue of themselves,
blue of that upper earth,
blue of the depth upon depth of flowers,
lost;

flowers,
if I could have taken once my breath of them,
enough of them,
more than earth,
even than of the upper earth,
had passed with me
beneath the earth;

if I could have caught up from the earth,
the whole of the flowers of the earth,
if once I could have breathed into myself
the very golden crocuses
and the red,
and the very golden hearts of the first saffron,
the whole of the golden mass,
the whole of the great fragrance,
I could have dared the loss.

V

So for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness
I have lost the earth
and the flowers of the earth,
and the live souls above the earth,

and you who passed across the light
and reached
ruthless;

you who have your own light,
who are to yourself a presence,
who need no presence;

yet for all your arrogance
and your glance,
I tell you this:

such loss is no loss,
such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls
of blackness,
such terror
is no loss;

hell is no worse than your earth
above the earth,
hell is no worse,
no, nor your flowers
nor your veins of light
nor your presence,
a loss;

my hell is no worse than yours
though you pass among the flowers and speak
with the spirits above earth.

VI

Against the black
I have more fervour
than you in all the splendour of that place,
against the blackness
and the stark grey
I have more light;

and the flowers,
if I should tell you,
you would turn from your own fit paths
toward hell,
turn again and glance back

and I would sink into a place
even more terrible than this.

VII

At least I have the flowers of myself,
and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence
and my own spirit for light;

and my spirit with its loss
knows this;
though small against the black,

small against the formless rocks,
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass.

OREAD

Whirl up, sea—
whirl your pointed pines,
splash your great pines
on our rocks,
hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.

THE POOL

Are you alive?
I touch you.
You quiver like a sea-fish.
I cover you with my net.
What are you—banded one?

MOONRISE

WILL you glimmer on the sea?
will you fling your spear-head
on the shore?
what note shall we pitch?
we have a song,
on the bank we share our arrows;
the loosed string tells our note:

O flight,
bring her swiftly to our song.
She is great,
we measure her by the pine trees.

ORION DEAD

THE cornel-trees
uplift from the furrows;
the roots at their bases
strike lower through the barley-sprays.

So arise and face me.
I am poisoned with rage of song.

I once pierced the flesh
of the wild deer,
now I am afraid to touch
the blue and the gold-veined hyacinths.

I will tear the full flowers
and the little heads
of the grape-hyacinths;
I will strip the life from the bulb
until the ivory layers
lie like narcissus petals
on the black earth.

Arise,
lest I bend an ash-tree
into a taut bow,

and slay—and tear
all the roots from the earth.

The cornel-wood blazes
and strikes through the barley-sprays
but I have lost heart for this.

I break a staff.
I break the tough branch.
I know no light in the woods.
I have lost pace with the wind.

HERMONAX

Gods of the sea;
Ino,
leaving warm meads
for the green, grey-green fastnesses
of the great deeps;
and Palemon,
bright seeker of sea-shaft,
hear me.

Let all whom the sea loves
come to its altar front,
and I
who can offer no other sacrifice to thee
bring this.

Broken by great waves,
the wavelets flung it here,
this sea-gliding creature,
this strange creature like a weed,
covered with salt foam,
torn from the hillocks of rock.

I, Hermonax,
caster of nets,
risking chance,
plying the sea craft,
came on it.

Thus to sea god,
gift of sea wrack;
I, Hermonax, offer it
to thee, Ino,
and to Palemon.

SITALKAS

THOU art come at length
more beautiful
than any cool god
in a chamber under
Lycia's far coast,
than any high god
who touches us not
here in the seeded grass,
aye, than Argestes
scattering the broken leaves.

THE TRIBUTE

I

SQUALOR spreads its hideous length
through the carts and the asses' feet,
squalor coils and reopens
and creeps under barrow
and heap of refuse
and the broken sherds
of the market-place—
it lengthens and coils
and uncoils and draws back
and recoils
through the crooked streets.

Squalor blights and makes hideous
our lives—it has smothered
the beat of our songs,
and our hearts are spread out,
flowers—opened but to receive
the wheel of the cart,
the hoof of the ox,
to be trod of the sheep.

Squalor spreads its hideous length
through the carts and the asses' feet—
squalor has entered and taken our songs
and we haggle and cheat,
praise fabrics worn threadbare,
ring false coin for silver,
offer refuse for meat.

2

While we shouted our wares
with the swindler and beggar,
our cheap stuffs for the best,
while we cheated and haggled and bettered
each low trick
and railed with the rest—

In a trice squalor failed,
even squalor to cheat
for a voice
caught the sky in one sudden note,
spread grass at the horses' feet,
spread a carpet of scented thyme
and meadow-sweet
till the asses lifted their heads
to the air
with the stifled cattle and sheep.

Ah, squalor was cheated at last

for a bright head flung back,
caught the ash-tree fringe
of the foot-hill,
the violet slope of the hill,
one bright head flung back
stilled the haggling,
one throat bared
and the shouting was still.

Clear, clear—
till our heart's shell was reft
with the shrill notes,
our old hatreds were healed.

Squalor spreads its hideous length
through the carts and the asses' feet,
squalor coils and draws back
and recoils
with no voice to rebuke—
for the boys have gone out of the city,
the songs withered black on their lips.

3

And we turn from the market,
the haggling, the beggar, the cheat,
to cry to the gods of the city
in the open space
of the temple—

we enter the temple-space
to cry to the gods and forget
the clamour, the filth.

We turn to the old gods of the city,
of the city once blessed
with daemon and spirit of blitheness
and spirit of mirth,
we cry;
what god with shy laughter,
or with slender winged ankles is left?

What god, what bright spirit for us,
what daemon is left
of the many that crowded the porches
that haunted the streets,
what fair god
with bright sandal and belt?

Though we tried the old turns of the city
and searched the old streets,
though we cried to the gods of the city:
O spirits, turn back,
re-enter the gates of our city—.
we met
but one god,
one tall god with a spear-shaft,
one bright god with a lance.

4

They have sent the old gods from the city:
on the temple step,
the people gather to cry for revenge,
to chant their hymns and to praise
the god of the lance.

They have banished the gods
and the half-gods
from the city streets,
they have turned from the god
of the cross roads,
the god of the hearth,
the god of the sunken well
and the fountain source,
they have chosen one,
to him only
they offer pæan and chant.

Though but one god is left in the city,
shall we turn to his treacherous feet,
though but one god is left in the city,
can he lure us
with his clamour and shout,
can he snare our hearts in his net,
can he blind us
with the light of his lance?

Could he snare our spirit and flesh,
he would cast it in irons to lie
and rot in the sodden grass,
and we know his glamour is dross,
we know him a blackened light,
and his beauty withered and spent
beside one young life that is lost.

5

Though not one of the city turned,
not one girl but to glance
with contempt toward us
that our hearts were so faint
with despair and doubt,
contempt for us that our lips
could not sing to the god of the lance—

Though not one of the city turned
as we searched through the city streets,
though the maidens gathered their veils
and the women their robes
as we passed:—

Though not one of the city turned
as we paused at the city gate,
a few old men rose up
with eyes no fear or contempt
could harden—with lips worn frail
with no words of hate.

A few old men rose up
with a few sad women to greet and to hail us,
a few lads crept to welcome
and comfort us, their white brows
set with hope
as light circles an olive-branch.

6

With these we will cry to another,
with these we will stand apart
to lure some god to our city,
to hail him:
return from your brake,
your copse or your forest haunt.

O spirit still left to our city,
we call to your wooded haunt,
we cry:
O daemon of grasses,
O spirit of simples and roots,
O gods of the plants of the earth—

O god of the simples and grasses,
we cry to you now from our hearts,
O heal us—bring balm for our sickness,
return and soothe us with bark
and hemlock and feverwort.

O god of the power to strike out
memory of terror past,
bring branch of heal-all and tufts,
of the sweet and the bitter grass,
bring shaft and flower of the reeds
and cresses and meadow plants.

Return—look again on our city,
though the people cry through the streets,
though they hail another,
have pity—return to our gates,
with a love as great as theirs,
we entreat you
for our city's sake.

7

As we lift the bright heads
of the wild flowers,
compare leaf to leaf,
as we touch the hemlock and poppy,
may our spirits released,
forget this despair and torture,
this terror and doubt.

As we lift the bright heads
of the wild flowers,
may we know that our spirits are kept
as they are, folded and wrapped
apart in a sheltering leaf.

We are veiled as the bud of the poppy
in the poppy-sheath,
and our hearts will break from their bondage
and spread as the poppy-leaf—
leaf by leaf, radiant and perfect
at last in the summer heat.

May we know that our spirits at last
will be cleansed of all bitterness—
that no one god may trample the earth,
but the others still dwell apart
in a high place
with our dead and our lost.

8

That the boys our city has lost
and the gods still dwell apart
in a city set fairer than this
with column and porch.

That the boys still dwell apart
and laugh in their gladness and shout
their challenges each to each
for the foot race or the wrestling match—

They stand in a circle and laugh
and challenge each other to meet
with jest that no shield or shape
of banner or helmet or dress—

That no banner or shield or shape
or colour of tunic or vest
can divide now or rend their hearts
as they leap toward the wrestling match,
as they strip for the race—

That the boys of the cities keep
with the gods apart,
for our world was too base
for their youth,
our city too dark,
our thoughts were too dull for their thoughts,
our heart for their hearts.

9

We will choose for each lad of the city,
a flower or a spray of grass—

For the lads who drew apart,
the scholar and poet we place
wind-flower or lily or wreath
of ivy and crocus shaft,
and the lads who went to slay
with passion and thirst,
we give roses and flowers of bay.

That the lads in that city apart
may know of our love and keep

remembrance and speak of us—
may lift their hands that the gods
revisit earth.

That the lads of the cities
may yet remember us,
we spread shaft of privet and sweet
lily from meadow and forest,
and the wild white lily,
and the wood-lily,
and the red shaft from the mountain-side.

10

And this we will say for remembrance,
speak this with their names:

Could beauty be done to death,
they had struck her dead
in ages and ages past,
could beauty be withered from earth,
they had cast her forth,
root and stalk
scattered and flailed—

They had trod her to death with sneers,
they had bartered her
for a piece of thin money tossed up
to fall half alloy,
they had stripped her and sent her forth.

Could beauty be caught and hurt,
could beauty be rent with a thought,
for a thrust of a sword,
for a piece of thin money tossed up
then beauty were dead.

Long, long before we came to earth,
long, long before we rent our hearts
with this worship, this fear
and this dread.

II

Could beauty be done to death—
though the swirl of the thousands cross
and eddy and fall away,

though the crowd of the millions meet
to shout and slay,

though the host of the people pass
and famish in bitterness,
state by state, people by people,
and perish—we cry:

Could beauty be caught and hurt,
could beauty be rent with a thought,
could beauty be beaten out,
O gold, stray but alive
on the dead ash of our hearth—

Could beauty be caught and hurt
they had done her to death with their sneers
in ages and ages past,
could beauty be sacrificed
for a thrust of a sword,
for a piece of thin money
tossed up to fall half alloy—
then beauty were dead
long, long before we saw her face.

Could beauty be beaten out,—
O youth the cities have sent
to strike at each other's strength,
it is you who have kept her alight.

CHORUSES FROM THE IPHIGENEIA IN AULIS AND THE HIPPOLYTUS OF EURIPIDES

Translated by H. D.

FROM THE IPHIGENEIA IN AULIS OF EURIPIDES

I

Chorus of the Women of Chalkis

I

I crossed sand-hills.
I stand among the sea-drift before Aulis.
I crossed Euripos' strait—
Foam hissed after my boat.

I left Chalkis,
My city and the rock-ledges.
Arethusa twists among the boulders,
Increases—cuts into the surf.

I come to see the battle-line
And the ships rowed here
By these spirits—
The Greeks are but half-man.

Golden Menelaus
And Agamemnon of proud birth
Direct the thousand ships.

They have cut pine-trees
For their oars.
They have gathered the ships for one purpose:
Helen shall return.

There are clumps of marsh-reed
And spear-grass about the strait.
Paris the herdsman passed through them
When he took Helen—Aphrodite's gift.

For he had judged the goddess
More beautiful than Hera.
Pallas was no longer radiant
As the three stood
Among the fresh-shallows of the strait.

2

I crept through the woods
Between the altars:
Artemis haunts the place.
Shame, scarlet, fresh-opened—a flower,
Strikes across my face.
And sudden—light upon shields,
Low huts—the armed Greeks,
Circles of hòrses.

I have longed for this.
I have seen Ajax.

I have known Protesilaos
And that other Ajax—Salamis' light
They counted ivory-discs.
They moved them—they laughed.
They were seated together
On the sand-ridges.

I have seen Palamed,
Child of Poseidon's child:
Diomed, radiant discobolus:
Divine Merion, a war-god,
Startling to men:
Island Odysseus from the sea-rocks:

And Nireos, most beautiful
Of beautiful Greeks.

3

A flash—
Achilles passed across the beach.
(He is the sea-woman's child
Chiron instructed.)

Achilles had strapped the wind
About his ankles,
He brushed rocks
The waves had flung.
He ran in armour.

He led the four-yoked chariot
He had challenged to the foot-race.
Emelos steered
And touched each horse with pointed goad.

I saw the horses:
Each beautiful head was clamped with gold.

Silver streaked the centre horses.
They were fastened to the pole.
The outriders swayed to the road-stead.
Colour spread up from ankle and steel-hoof.
Bronze flashed.

And Achilles, set with brass,
Bent forward,
Level with the chariot-rail.

4

If a god should stand here
He could not speak
At the sight of ships
Circled with ships.

This beauty is too much
For any woman.
It is burnt across my eyes.

The line is an ivory-horn.
The Myrmidons in fifty quivering ships
Are stationed on the right.

These are Achilles' ships.
On the prow of each
A goddess sheds gold:
Sea-spirits are cut in tiers of gold.

5

Next, equal-oared ships
Were steered from the port of Argos
By one of the Mekistians.
Sthenelos was with him.

Then the son of Theseus
Led out sixty ships,
Prow to prow from Attica.
A great spirit keeps them—
Pallas, graved above each ship.

6

Wings bear her
And horses, iron of hoof:
The phantom and chariot
Appear to men slashed with waves.

Fifty Bœotian ships,
Heavy with bright arms,
Floated next:
The earth-god stood at the prow
With golden-headed serpent.

Leitos, born of earth,
Guided this group of ships.

Ships had gathered
From ports of Phokis:
The Lokrians sent as many.
Ajax left beautiful Thronion
To lead both fleets.

7

From Mykenæ's unhewn rock,
Men, led out by Agamemnon,
Served beyond the breakwater
In one hundred ships.
His brother went with him—
Lover to lover.

Insult was thrown upon both.
Helen, possessed,
Followed a stranger
From the Greek courtyard.
They would avenge this.

Nestor brought ships from Pylos.
They are stamped
With Alpheus' bull-hoof.

8

There were twelve Ænian sails:
Gouneos led the twelve ships.
He is the tribe-king.
Near him were Elis' petty-chiefs—
The common people call Epians—
And Eurytos, their great chief.

Meges brought white-wood oars
From island Taphos.
He left Echinades—
Sailors find no entrance
Across the narrow rocks.

Ajax of Salamis
Finished the great arc:
He joined both branches
To the far border
With twelve ships,
Strung of flexible planks.

9

I have heard all this.
I have looked too

Upon this people of ships.
You could never count the Greek sails
Nor the flat keels of the foreign boats.

I have heard—
I myself have seen the floating ships
And nothing will ever be the same—
The shouts,
The harrowing voices within the house.
I stand apart with an army:
My mind is graven with ships.

II

Paris came to Ida.
He grew to slim height
Among the silver-hoofed beasts.
Strange notes made his flute
A Phrygian pipe.
He caught all Olympus
In his bent reeds.
While his great beasts
Cropped the grass,
The goddesses held the contest
Which sent him among the Greeks.

He came before Helen's house.
He stood on the ivory steps.
He looked upon Helen and brought

Desire to the eyes
That looked back—
The Greeks have snatched up their spears.
They have pointed the helms of their ships
Toward the bulwarks of Troy.

III

I

The crowd of the Greek force
With stacked arms and with troop-ships
Will come to Simois—
The strait, furrowed deep with silver.

They will enter Troy.
The sun-god built the porticoes.
Kassandra shakes out her hair—
Its gold clasped
With half-opened laurel-shoots—
When the god strikes her
With his breath.

They will stand on Pergamos.
They will crowd about the walls.

They will lift their shields,
Riveted with brass,
As they enter Simois
In their painted ships.

Two brothers of Helen are spirits
And dwell apart in the air,
Yet the shieldsmen will take her,
And men, alert with spear-shaft,
Will carry her to the Greek coast.

2

And Pergamos,
City of the Phrygians,
Ancient Troy
Will be given up to its fate.
They will mark the stone-battlements
And the circle of them
With a bright stain.
They will cast out the dead—
A sight for Priam's queen to lament
And her frightened daughters.

And Helen, child of Zeus,
Will cry aloud for the mate
She has left in that Phrygian town.

May no child of mine,
Nor any child of my child
Ever fashion such a tale
As the Phrygians shall murmur,
As they stoop at their distaffs,
Whispering with Lydians,
Splendid with weight of gold—

"Helen has brought this.
They will tarnish our bright hair.
They will take us as captives
For Helen—born of Zeus
When he sought Leda with bird-wing
And touched her with bird-throat—
If men speak truth.

"But still we lament our state,
The desert of our wide courts,
Even if there is no truth
In the legends cut on ivory
Nor in the poets
Nor the songs."

IV

I

Burnished-head
By burnished-head,
Pierides sought the bride:
They touched the flute-stops
And the lyre-strings for the dance,

They made the syrinx-notes
Shrill through the reed-stalk.
They cut gold sandal-prints
Across Pelion
Toward the gods' feast.

They called Pelios
From steep centaur-paths,
And Thetis
Among forest trees:
They chanted at the feast
Where Phrygian Ganymede,
Loved of Zeus,
Caught the measure of wine
In the circle of the golden cups.
While fifty sea-spirits
Moved and paused
To mark the beat
Of chanted words
Where light flashed
Below them on the sand.

2

A centaur-herd,
Wild-horses, crowned with grass,
Swept among the feasting gods
With fir-shoots
Toward the wine-jars.
And Chiron,
Inspired by the rites of song,
Cried with a loud voice:

"From Thessaly,
The great light

Whom Thetis will beget,"
(He spoke his name)
"Will come with the Myrmidons
Spearsmen and hosts with shields,
Golden and metal-wrought,
To scatter fire
Over Priam's beautiful land."

Therefore the spirits blessed
The fair-fathered,
The Nereid,
And chanted at Pelios' feast.

3

(*To Iphigeneia.*)
Your hair is scattered light:
The Greeks will bind it with petals.

And like a little beast,
Dappled and without horns,
That scampered on the hill-rocks,
They will leave you
With stained throat—
Though you never cropped hill-grass
To the reed-cry
And the shepherd's note.

Some Greek hero is cheated

And your mother's court
Of its bride.

And we ask this—where truth is,
Of what use is valour and is worth?
For evil has conquered the race,
There is no power but in base men,
Nor any man whom the gods do not hate.

V

Iph. It is not for me, the day,
Nor this light of sun.
Ah, mother, mother,
The same terror is cast on us both.

Alas for that Phrygian cleft,
Beaten by snow,
The mountain-hill, Ida,
Where Priam left the young prince,
Brought far from his mother
To perish on the rocks:
Paris who is called
Idæos, Idæos
In the Phrygian court.

Would that he had never thrived,
Would that he had not kept the flocks
O that he had not dwelt
At that white place of the water-gods:

In meadows,
Thick with yellow flower-sprays
And flowers, tint of rose,
And the hyacinth we break for gods.

For Pallas came there,
And Kypris, crafty-heart,
And Hera and Hermes, legate of god
(Beautiful Kypris,
Pallas with spear-hilt,
Hera, queen, wed with Zeus.)
It was a hated judgment, O slender-girls.
The contest of beautiful-face by beautiful-face
Has brought this:
I am sent to death
To bring honour to the Greeks.

Ch. For Ilium, for Ilium
Artemis exacts sacrifice.

Iph. O wretched, wretched,—
I know you, Helen, sharp to do hurt.
I am slaughtered for your deceit.

O I am miserable:
You cherished me, my mother,
But even you desert me.
I am sent to an empty place.

O that Aulis had not harboured
These beaked ships,
Nor sheltered their brazen prows
As they floated toward Troy:
O that Zeus had not turned them
Nor wafted their splendour
Through the straits:
For Zeus strikes different winds
To each ship,
So that some men laugh
With the light flap of the sails,
Some bend with anger
At their work:

Some haul up the sheets,
Some knot the great ropes,
Some dash through the spray
To quick death.

And each man is marked for toil,
Much labour is his fate,
Nor is there any new hurt
That may be added to the race.

VI

Iph. Now sing, O slight girls,
Without change of note,
My death-pæon and Artemis' chant.

Stand silent, you Greeks.
The fire kindles.
They step to do sacrifice
With reed-basket of salt-cakes:
I come—I free Hellas.
My father, as priest awaits me
At the right altar-step.

Hail me now.
I destroy Phrygia and all Troy.
Clasp on the flower-circlet.
Wind it through the locks just caught with it.
Bear water in a deep bowl.
Stand around the temple-front
And the altar of heaped earth.
For I come to do sacrifice,
To break the might of the curse,
To honour the queen, if she permit,
The great one, with my death.

Ch. O, mother, high-born,
Of proud birth,
Will you not weep for us?
For we may not cry out
In the splendour of this holy place.

Iph. Slight girls, stand forth,
Chant Artemis—Artemis:
She fronts the coast,

She stands opposite Chalkis—
For spears will clash in the contest
My fame has brought
In the shelter of these narrow straits.

Hail, land of my birth.
Hail Mykenæ, where I once dwelt—

Ch. (She calls upon the city of Perseos,
Built of unchiselled rock.)

Iph.—you brought me to the Greek light
And I will not hold you guilty
For my death.

Ch. Your name will never be forgotten,
Your honour will always last.

Iph. Alas, day, you brought light,
You trailed splendour
You showed us god:
I salute you, most precious one,
But I go to a new place,
Another life.

Ch. Alas, she steps forward
To destroy Ilium and the Phrygians.
A wreath is about her head,
She takes water in a dish.

She comes to meet death,
To stain the altar of the goddess,
To hold her girl-throat
Toward the knife-thrust.

The land-springs await
And the sacred bowls,
And the Greek host, eager to depart.
But let us not forget
With our past happiness,
Artemis, daughter of god,
Queen among the great,
But cry out:
Artemis, rejoicer in blood-sacrifice,
Send the force of the Greeks
To Troy and the Phrygian court.

And grant that Agamemnon may clasp
Fame, never to be forgot
Upon his brow—encircled
By Greek spear-shafts,
May he gain honour for all the Greeks.

FROM THE HIPPOLYTUS OF EURIPIDES

I

THERAPONTES.
DAEMON initiate, spirit
of the god-race, Artemis,
Latona's daughter,
child of Zeus,
of all maids loveliest,
we greet you, mistress:
you dwell in your father's house,
the gold-wrought porches of Zeus,
apart in the depth of space.

HIPPOLYTUS.
Of all maids, loveliest,
I greet you, Artemis,
loveliest upon Olympus:
dearest, to you this gift,
flower set by flower and leaf,
broken by uncut grass,
where neither scythe has dipped
nor does the shepherd yet

venture to lead his sheep;
there it is white and fragrant,
the wild-bee swirls across;
as a slow rivulet,
mystic peace broods and drifts:

Ah! but my own, my dearest,
take for your gold-wrought locks
from my hands these flowers,
as from a spirit.

II

Chorus of Troizenian Women.

At high-tide,
the sea—they say—
left a deep pool
below the rock-shelf:
in that clear place
where the women dip
their water-jars,
my friend steeped her veils
and spread the scarlet stuff
across the hot ridge
of sun-baked rocks:
she first brought word
of my mistress:

"She lies sick,
faint on her couch
within the palace;
her thin veils
cast a shadow
across her bright locks.
I count three days
since her beautiful lips
touched the fine wheat—
her frail body
disdains nourishment:
she suffers—
some secret hurt
hastens her death."

Surely, O young queen,
you are possessed
by Pan, by Hecate,
by some spirit
of the Corybantic rites,
or by Cybele
from the hill-rocks!
or have you sinned
that you suffer thus,
against Artemis?
Have you offered
no sacrificial cakes
to the huntress?
For she walks above earth,

along the sea-coast,
and across the salt trail
of the sea-drift.

Or is it that your lord,
born of Erechtheus,
the king most noble in descent,
neglects you in the palace
and your bride-couch
for another in secret?
Or has some sea-man,
landing at our port,
friendly to ships,
brought sad news from Crete?
For some great hurt
binds you to your couch,
broken in spirit.

III

PHÆDRA.
Lift my head, help me up,
I am bruised, bone and flesh;
chafe my white hands, my servants:
this weight about my forehead?
Ah, my veil—loose it—
spread my hair across my breast.

TROPHOS.
There, do not start,
child, nor toss about;
only calm and high pride
can help your hurt:
fate tries all alike.

PHÆDRA.
Ai, ai! to drink deep
of spring water
from its white source;
ai, ai! for rest—black poplars—
thick grass—sleep.

TROPHOS.
What is this you ask,
wild words, mad speech—
hide your hurt, my heart,
hide your hurt
before these servants.

PHÆDRA.
Take me to the mountains!
O for woods, pine tracts,
where hounds athirst for death,
leap on the bright stags!
God, how I would shout to the beasts
with my gold hair torn loose;
I would shake the Thessalian dart,
I would hurl the barbed arrow from my grasp.

TROPHOS.
Why, so distraught,
child, child, why the chase
and this cold water you would ask:
but we may get you that
from deep rills that cut the slopes
before the gate.

PHÆDRA.
Artemis of the salt beach
and of the sea-coast,
mistress of the race-course,
trodden of swift feet,
O for your flat sands
where I might mount
with goad and whip
the horses of Enetas.

IV

O Spirit,
spark by spark,
you instil fire
through the sight:
to hearts you attack
you grant rare happiness!
Do not front me with grief,
yourself discord manifest!

For neither lightning-shaft
nor yet stars shot
from a distant place
can equal the love-dart,
sped from your hands,
child of God, Eros.

In vain along Alpheos,
in vain (if we defy Eros)
are the Greek altars
bright with blood,
and the Pythian rocks
with beasts slain
for Helios:
Aphrodite's child
is man's chief absolute:
he protects love's portal
and love's rite,
or ruthlessly betrays men,
destroying them
in his flight.

So at Oechalie,
that girl, chaste—
a wild colt,
mateless, uncaught—
was betrayed by Kupris:
Heracles dragged her,
a bacchante, hell-loosed,

from her palace
to his ship:
there was flame and blood spilt
for the bride-chant,
for rapture, unhappiness.

O Thebes,
high-built and chaste,
O Dirke's river-bank,
you can tell how Kupris strikes:
for with thunder-bolt,
alight at both points,
she slew the mother of Bacchus,
child of Zeus!
Ah evil wedlock! Ah fate!
she incites all to evil,
she flutters over all things,
like a bee in flight.

V

O for wings,
swift, a bird,
set of God
among the bird-flocks!
I would dart
from some Adriatic precipice,
across its wave-shallows and crests,
to Eradanus' river-source;

to the place
where his daughters weep,
thrice-hurt for Phæton's sake,
tears of amber and gold which dart
their fire through the purple surface.

I would seek
the song-haunted Hesperides
and the apple-trees
set above the sand drift:
there the god
of the purple marsh
lets no ships pass;
he marks the sky-space
which Atlas keeps—
that holy place
where streams,
fragrant as honey,
pass to the couches spread
in the palace of Zeus:
there the earth-spirit,
source of bliss,
grants the gods happiness.

O ship
white-sailed of Crete,
you brought my mistress
from her quiet palace
through breaker and crash of surf

to love-rite of unhappiness!
Though the boat swept
toward great Athens,
though she was made fast
with ship-cable and ship-rope
at Munychia the sea-port,
though her men stood
on the main-land,
(whether unfriended by all alike
or only by the gods of Crete)
it was evil—the auspice.

On this account
my mistress,
most sick at heart,
is stricken of Kupris
with unchaste thought:
helpless and overwrought,
she would fasten
the rope-noose about the beam
above her bride-couch
and tie it to her white throat:
she would placate the dæmon's wrath,
still the love-fever in her breast,
and keep her spirit inviolate.

VI

No more, O my spirit,
are we flawless,
we have seen evil undrempt:
I myself saw it:
the Greek, the most luminous,
the Athenian, the star-like,
banished through his father's hate
to a country far distant.

O sand dunes and sand-stretches
of the Athenian coast,
O mountain-thickets
where you climbed,
following the wild beasts,
with hounds, delicate of feet,
hunting with the dæmon, Artemis!

No more
will you mount your chariot,
yoked with horses of Enetas,
nor spur forward your steed
toward the stadium at Limnas,
and your chant, ever rapturous,
and the answering lyre-note,
shall cease in the king's house:
far in the forest depth
in the glades where she loves to rest,

Latona's child shall be crownless:
at your flight
the contest of the maidens will cease,
and their love-longing, comfortless.

And because of your fate,
I accept bitter hurt,
and weep:
ai, ai, poor mother,
your birth-pangs were fruitless:
I am wroth with these spirits:
alas, Karites, never-separate,
why, why have you sent him forth,
the unfortunate, blameless,
from his palace,
from his own gates?

VII

Men you strike
and the gods'
dauntless spirits alike,
and Eros helps you, O Kupris,
with wings' swift
interplay of light:
now he flies above earth,
now above sea-crash
and whirl of salt:
he enchants beasts

who dwell in the hills
and shoals in the sea-depth:
he darts gold wings
maddening their spirits:
he charms all born of earth,
(all whom Helios visits,
fiery with light)
and men's hearts:
you alone, Kupris,
creator of all life,
reign absolute.

ODYSSEY

Muse,
tell me of this man of wit,
who roamed long years
after he had sacked
Troy's sacred streets.

All the rest
who had escaped death,
returned,
fleeing battle and the sea;
only Odysseus,
captive of a goddess,
desperate and home-sick,
thought but of his wife and palace;
but Calypso,
that nymph and spirit,
yearning in the furrowed rock-shelf,
burned
and sought to be his mistress;
but years passed,
the time was ripe,
the gods decreed,
(although traitors plot
to betray him in his own court),

he was to return
to Ithaca;
and all the gods pitied him;
but Poseidon
steadfast to the last
hated
god-like Odysseus.

The sea-god visited
a distant folk,
Ethiopians,
who at the edge of earth
are divided into two parts,
(half watch the sun rise,
half, the sun set),
there the hecatomb
of slain sheep and oxen
await his revels:
and while he rejoiced,
seated at the feast,
the rest of the gods
gathered in the palace of Olympian Zeus;
and the father of men and of gods spoke thus:
(for he remembered bright Egisthus,
slain of Agamemnon's child,
great Orestes:)

O you spirits,
how men hate the gods,

for they say evil comes of us,
when they themselves,
by their own wickedness,
court peril
beyond their fate;
so Egisthus, defiant,
sought Agamemnon's wife
and slew Agamemnon
returning to his own palace,
though we ourselves
sent bright Hermes,
slayer of Argos,
to warn him
lest Orestes,
attaining to man's estate,
demand his inheritance
and take vengeance:
we forbade him to strike the king,
we warned him to respect his wife;
but could Hermes
of gracious aspect,
subtle with kindly speech,
thus avert the foul work?

Then the grey-eyed Athene,
the goddess, spoke:
O my father, Kronos begot,
first among the great,
his death at least was just,

so may all perish who err thus;
but my heart is rent
for the prudent Odysseus,
who, exiled from his friends,
is kept too long distressed
in an island, sea swept,
in the sea midst,
a forest island,
haunt of a spirit,
child of Atlas,
crafty of thought,
who knows the sea depth,
who supports the high pillars
which cut sky from earth;
it is his child
who keeps Odysseus
lamenting with broken heart,
ceaseless to tempt him
with soft and tender speech,
that he forget Ithaca;
but Odysseus,
yearning to see but the smoke
drift above his own house,
prefers death;
your heart, is it not touched,
O Olympian?
did not Odysseus please you
when he made sacrifice
before the Grecian ships

in great Troy?
why are you angry, Zeus?

Then Zeus,
keeper of the clouds,
answering her, spoke:
O my child
what quaint words
have sped your lips,
for how could I forget
the god-like Odysseus,
a spirit surpassing men,
first to make sacrifice
to the deathless
in the sky-space?
but Poseidon,
girder of earth,
though yet he spares his life,
nurtures unending hate;
he goads him from place to place
because of the Cyclops
blinded of Odysseus,
Polyphemus, half-god,
greatest of the Cyclops,
whom the nymph Thoosa,
child of Phorcys,
king of the waste sea, begot
when she lay with Poseidon
among the shallow rocks:

but come,
let us plot
to reinstate Odysseus,
and Poseidon must abandon his wrath;
for what can one god accomplish,
striving alone
to defy all the deathless?

Then the grey-eyed Athene,
the goddess, spoke:
O my father, Kronos begot,
first among the great,
if then it seems just
to the highest,
that Odysseus return
to his own house,
let us swiftly send
Hermes, slayer of Argos,
your attendant,
that he state
to the fair-haired nymph,
our irrevocable wish,
that Odysseus,
valiant of heart,
be sent back:
and I will depart to Ithaca,
to incite his son,
to put courage in his heart,
that he call to the market place

the long-haired Greeks
and shut his gates
to the pretendants
who ceaselessly devour his flocks,
sheep and horned oxen
of gentle pace:
that he strive
for his father's sake
and gain favour
in men's thoughts,
I will send him to Sparta,
to Pylos' sandy waste.

She spoke
and about her feet
clasped bright sandals,
gold-wrought, imperishable,
which lift her above sea,
across the land stretch,
wind-like,
like the wind breath.

HYMEN

They said:
she is high and far and blind
in her high pride,
but now that my head is bowed
in sorrow, I find
she is most kind.

We have taken life, they said,
blithely, not groped in a mist
for things that are not—
are if you will, but bloodless—
why ask happiness of the dead?
and my heart bled.

Ah, could they know
how violets throw strange fire,
red and purple and gold,
how they glow
gold and purple and red
where her feet tread.

HYMEN

As from a temple service, tall and dignified, with slow pace, each a queen, the sixteen matrons from the temple of Hera pass before the curtain —a dark purple hung between Ionic columns— of the porch or open hall of a palace. Their hair is bound as the marble hair of the temple Hera. Each wears a crown or diadem of gold.

They sing—the music is temple music, deep, simple, chanting notes:

FROM the closed garden
Where our feet pace
Back and forth each day,
This gladiolus white,
This red, this purple spray—
Gladiolus tall with dignity
As yours, lady—we lay
Before your feet and pray:

Of all the blessings—
Youth, joy, ecstasy—
May one gift last

(As the tall gladiolus may
Outlast the wind-flower,
Winter-rose or rose),
One gift above,
Encompassing all those;

For her, for him,
For all within these palace walls,
Beyond the feast,
Beyond the cry of Hymen and the torch,
Beyond the night and music
Echoing through the porch till day.

The music, with its deep chanting notes, dies away. The curtain hangs motionless in rich, full folds. Then from this background of darkness, dignity and solemn repose, a flute gradually detaches itself, becomes clearer and clearer, pipes alone one shrill, simple little melody.

From the distance, four children's voices blend with the flute, and four very little girls pass singly before the curtain, small maids or attendants of the sixteen matrons. Their hair is short and curls at the back of their heads like the hair of the chryselephantine Hermes. They sing:

Where the first crocus buds unfold
We found these petals near the cold
Swift river-bed.

Beneath the rocks where ivy-frond
Puts forth new leaves to gleam beyond
Those lately dead:

The very smallest two or three
Of gold (gold pale as ivory)
We gatherèd.

When the little girls have passed before the curtain, a wood-wind weaves a richer note into the flute melody; then the two blend into one song. But as the wood-wind grows in mellowness and richness, the flute gradually dies away into a secondary theme and the wood-wind alone evolves the melody of a new song.

Two by two—like two sets of medallions with twin profiles distinct, one head slightly higher, bent forward a little—the four figures of four slight, rather fragile taller children, are outlined with sharp white contour against the curtain.

The hair is smooth against the heads, falling to the shoulders, but slightly waved against the nape of the neck. They are looking down, each at a spray of winter-rose. The tunics fall to the knees in sharp marble folds. They sing:

Never more will the wind
Cherish you again,
Never more will the rain.

Never more
Shall we find you bright
In the snow and wind.

The snow is melted,
The snow is gone,
And you are flown:

Like a bird out of our hand,
Like a light out of our heart,
You are gone.

As the wistful notes of the wood-wind gradually dies away, there comes a sudden, shrill, swift piping.

Free and wild, like the wood-maidens of Artemis, is this last group of four—very straight with heads tossed back. They sing in rich, free, swift notes. They move swiftly before the curtain in contrast to the slow, important pace of the first two groups. Their hair is loose and rayed out like that of the sun-god. They are boyish in shape and gesture. They carry hyacinths in baskets, strapped like quivers to their backs. They reach to draw the flower sprays from the baskets, as the Huntress her arrows.

As they dart swiftly to and fro before the curtain, they are youth, they are spring—they are the Chelidonia, their song is the swallow-song of joy:

Between the hollows
Of the little hills
The spring spills blue—
Turquoise, sapphire, lapis-lazuli—
On a brown cloth outspread.

Ah see,
How carefully we lay them now,
Each hyacinth spray,
Across the marble floor—
A pattern your bent eyes
May trace and follow
To the shut bridal door.

Lady, our love, our dear,
Our bride most fair,
They grew among the hollows
Of the hills;
As if the sea had spilled its blue,
As if the sea had risen
From its bed,
And sinking to the level of the shore,
Left hyacinths on the floor.

There is a pause. Flute, pipe and wood-wind blend in a full, rich movement. There is no definite melody but full, powerful rhythm like soft but steady wind above forest trees. Into this, like rain, gradually creeps the note of strings.

As the strings grow stronger and finally dominate the whole, the bride-chorus passes before the curtain. There may be any number in this chorus. The figures—tall young women, clothed in long white tunics—follow one another closely, yet are all distinct like a procession of a temple frieze.

The bride in the center is not at first distinguishable from her maidens; but as they begin their song, the maidens draw apart into two groups, leaving the veiled symbolic figure standing alone in the center.

The two groups range themselves to right and left like officiating priestesses. The veiled figure stands with her back against the curtain, the others being in profile. Her head is swathed in folds of diaphanous white, through which the features are visible, like the veiled Tanagra.

When the song is finished, the group to the bride's left turns about; also the bride, so that all face in one direction. In processional form they pass out, the figure of the bride again merging, not distinguishable from the maidens.

Strophe

But of her
Who can say if she is fair?
Bound with fillet,
Bound with myrtle

Underneath her flowing veil,
Only the soft length
(Beneath her dress)
Of saffron shoe is bright
As a great lily-heart
In its white loveliness.

Antistrophe

But of her
We can say that she is fair.
We bleached the fillet,
Brought the myrtle;
To us the task was set
Of knotting the fine threads of silk:
We fastened the veil,
And over the white foot
Drew on the painted shoe
Steeped in Illyrian crocus.

Strophe

But of her,
Who can say if she is fair?
For her head is covered over
With her mantle
White on white,
Snow on whiter amaranth,
Snow on hoar-frost,
Snow on snow,
Snow on whitest buds of myrrh.

Antistrophe

But of her,
We can say that she is fair;
For we know underneath
All the wanness,
All the heat
(In her blanched face)
Of desire
Is caught in her eyes as fire
In the dark center leaf
Of the white Syrian iris.

The rather hard, hieratic precision of the music—its stately pause and beat—is broken now into irregular lilt and rhythm of strings.

Four tall young women, very young matrons, enter in a group. They stand clear and fair, but this little group entirely lacks the austere precision of the procession of maidens just preceding them. They pause in the center of the stage; turn, one three-quarter, two in profile and the fourth full face; they stand, turned as if confiding in each other like a Tanagra group.

They sing lightly, their flower trays under their arms.

Along the yellow sand
Above the rocks
The laurel-bushes stand.

Against the shimmering heat
Each separate leaf
Is bright and cold;
And through the bronze
Of shining bark and wood
Run the fine threads of gold.

Here in our wicker-trays,
We bring the first faint blossoming
Of fragrant bays:

Lady, their blushes shine
As faint in hue
As when through petals
Of a laurel-rose
The sun shines through,
And throws a purple shadow
On a marble vase.

(Ah, love,
So her fair breasts will shine
With the faint shadow above.)

The harp chords become again more regular in simple definite rhythm. The music is not so intense as the bride-chorus; and quieter, more sedate, than the notes preceding the entrance of the last group.

Five or six slightly older serene young women enter in processional form; each holding before

her, with precise bending of arms, coverlets and linen, carefully folded, as if for the bride couch. The garments are purple, scarlet and deep blue, with edge of gold.

They sing to blending of wood-wind and harp.

From citron-bower be her bed,
Cut from branch of tree a-flower,
Fashioned for her maidenhead.

From Lydian apples, sweet of hue,
Cut the width of board and lathe.
Carve the feet from myrtle-wood.

Let the palings of her bed
Be quince and box-wood overlaid
With the scented bark of yew.

That all the wood in blossoming,
May calm her heart and cool her blood
For losing of her maidenhood.

The wood-winds become more rich and resonant. A tall youth crosses the stage as if seeking the bride door. The music becomes very rich, full of color.

The figure itself is a flame, an exaggerated symbol; the hair a flame; the wings, deep red or purple, stand out against the curtains in a

contrasting or almost clashing shade of purple. The tunic, again a rich purple or crimson, falls almost to the knees. The knees are bare; the sandals elaborately strapped over and over. The curtain seems a rich purple cloud, the figure, still brighter, like a flamboyant bird, half emerged in the sunset.

Love pauses just outside the bride's door with his gift, a tuft of black-purple cyclamen. He sings to the accompaniment of wood-winds, in a rich, resonant voice:

The crimson cover of her bed
Is not so rich, nor so deeply bled
The purple-fish that dyed it red,
As when in a hot sheltered glen
There flowered these stalks of cyclamen:

(Purple with honey-points
Of horns for petals;
Sweet and dark and crisp,
As fragrant as her maiden kiss.)

There with his honey-seeking lips
The bee clings close and warmly sips,
And seeks with honey-thighs to sway
And drink the very flower away.

(Ah, stern the petals drawing back;
Ah rare, ah virginal her breath!)

Crimson, with honey-seeking lips,
The sun lies hot across his back,
The gold is flecked across his wings.
Quivering he sways and quivering clings
(Ah, rare her shoulders drawing back!)
One moment, then the plunderer slips
Between the purple flower-lips.

Love passes out with a crash of cymbals. There is a momentary pause and the music falls into its calm, wave-like rhythm.

A band of boys passes before the curtain. They pass from side to side, crossing and recrossing; but their figures never confuse one another, the outlines are never blurred. They stand out against the curtain with symbolic gesture, stooping as if to gather up the wreaths, or swaying with long stiff branch as if to sweep the fallen petals from the floor.

There is no marked melody from the instruments, but the boys' voices, humming lightly as they enter, gradually evolve a little dance song. There are no words but the lilt up and down of the boys' tenor voices.

Then, as if they had finished the task of gathering up the wreaths and sweeping the petals, they stand in groups of two before the pillars where the torches have been placed. They lift the torches from the brackets. They hold them aloft

between them, one torch to each two boys. Their figures are cut against the curtain like the simple, triangular design on the base of a vase or frieze —the boys' heads on a level, the torches above them.

They sing in clear, half-subdued voices:

Where love is king,
Ah, there is little need
To dance and sing,
With bridal-torch to flare
Amber and scatter light
Across the purple air,
To sing and dance
To flute-note and to reed.

Where love is come
(Ah, love is come indeed!)
Our limbs are numb
Before his fiery need;
With all their glad
Rapture of speech unsaid,
Before his fiery lips
Our lips are mute and dumb.

Ah, sound of reed,
Ah, flute and trumpet wail,
Ah, joy decreed—
The fringes of her veil

Are seared and white;
Across the flare of light,
Blinded the torches fail.
(Ah, love is come indeed!)

At the end of the song, the torches flicker out and the figures are no longer distinguishable in the darkness. They pass out like shadows. The purple curtain hangs black and heavy.

The music dies away and is finally cut short with a few deep, muted chords.

DEMETER

I

MEN, fires, feasts,
steps of temple, fore-stone, lintel,
step of white altar, fire and after-fire,
slaughter before,
fragment of burnt meat,
deep mystery, grapple of mind to reach
the tense thought,
power and wealth, purpose and prayer alike,
(men, fires, feasts, temple steps)—useless.

Useless to me who plant
wide feet on a mighty plinth,
useless to me who sit,
wide of shoulder, great of thigh,
heavy in gold, to press
gold back against solid back
of the marble seat:
useless the dragons wrought on the arms,
useless the poppy-buds and the gold inset
of the spray of wheat.

Ah they have wrought me heavy
and great of limb—

she is slender of waist,
slight of breast, made of many fashions;
they have set *her* small feet
on many a plinth;
she they have known,
she they have spoken with,
she they have smiled upon,
she they have caught
and flattered with praise and gifts.

But useless the flattery
of the mighty power
they have granted me:
for I will not stay in her breast,
the great of limb,
though perfect the shell they have
fashioned me, these men!

Do I sit in the market place—
do I smile, does a noble brow
bend like the brow of Zeus—
am I a spouse, his or any,
am I a woman, or goddess or queen,
to be met by a god with a smile—and left?

II

Do you ask for a scroll,
parchment, oracle, prophecy, precedent;

do you ask for tablets marked with thought
or words cut deep on the marble surface,
do you seek measured utterance or the mystic
trance?

Sleep on the stones of Delphi—
dare the ledges of Pallas
but keep me foremost,
keep me before you, after you, with you,
never forget when you start
for the Delphic precipice,
never forget when you seek Pallas
and meet in thought
yourself drawn out from yourself
like the holy serpent,
never forget
in thought or mysterious trance—
I am greatest and least.

Soft are the hands of Love,
soft, soft are his feet;
you who have twined myrtle,
have you brought crocuses,
white as the inner
stript bark of the osier,
have you set
black crocus against the black
locks of another?

III

Of whom do I speak?
Many the children of gods
but first I take
Bromios, fostering prince,
lift from the ivy brake, a king.

Enough of the lightning,
enough of the tales that speak
of the death of the mother:
strange tales of a shelter
brought to the unborn,
enough of tale, myth, mystery, precedent—
a child lay on the earth asleep.

Soft are the hands of Love,
but what soft hands
clutched at the thorny ground,
scratched like a small white ferret
or foraging whippet or hound,
sought nourishment and found
only the crackling of ivy,
dead ivy leaf and the white
berry, food for a bird,
no food for this who sought,
bending small head in a fever,
whining with little breath.

Ah, small black head,
ah, the purple ivy bush,
ah, berries that shook and spilt
on the form beneath,
who begot you and left?

Though I begot no man child
all my days,
the child of my heart and spirit,
is the child the gods desert
alike and the mother in death—
the unclaimed Dionysos.

IV

What of her—
mistress of Death?

Form of a golden wreath
were my hands that girt her head,
fingers that strove to meet,
and met where the whisps escaped
from the fillet, of tenderest gold,
small circlet and slim
were my fingers then.

Now they are wrought of iron
to wrest from earth
secrets; strong to protect,

strong to keep back the winter
when winter tracks too soon
blanch the forest:
strong to break dead things,
the young tree, drained of sap,
the old tree, ready to drop,
to lift from the rotting bed
of leaves, the old
crumbling pine tree stock,
to heap bole and knot of fir
and pine and resinous oak,
till fire shatter the dark
and hope of spring
rise in the hearts of men.

What of her—
mistress of Death—
what of his kiss?

Ah, strong were his arms to wrest
slight limbs from the beautiful earth,
young hands that plucked the first
buds of the chill narcissus,
soft fingers that broke
and fastened the thorny stalk
with the flower of wild acanthus.

Ah, strong were the arms that took
(ah, evil the heart and graceless),
but the kiss was less passionate!

SIMAETHA

Drenched with purple,
drenched with dye, my wool,
bind you the wheel-spokes—
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

Drenched with purple,
steeped in the red pulp
of bursting sea-sloes—
turn, turn, turn my wheel!

(Ah did he think
I did not know,
I did not feel—
what wrack, what weal for him:
golden one, golden one,
turn again Aphrodite with the yellow zone,
I am cursed, cursed, undone!
Ah and my face, Aphrodite,
beside your gold,
is cut out of white stone!)

Laurel blossom and the red seed
of the red vervain weed,

burn, crackle in the fire,
burn, crackle for my need!
Laurel leaf, O fruited
branch of bay,
burn, burn away
thought, memory and hurt!

(Ah when he comes,
stumbling across my sill,
will he find me still,
fragrant as the white privet,
or as a bone,
polished in wet and sun,
worried of wild beaks,
and of the whelps' teeth—
worried of flesh,
left to bleach under the sun,
white as ash bled of heat,
white as hail blazing in sheet-lightning,
white as forked lightning
rending the sleet?)

THETIS

I

On the paved parapet
you will step carefully
from amber stones to onyx
flecked with violet,
mingled with light,
half showing the sea-grass
and sea-sand underneath,
reflecting your white feet
and the gay strap crimson
as lily-buds of Arion,
and the gold that binds your feet.

II

You will pass
beneath the island disk
(and myrtle-wood,
the carved support of it)
and the white stretch
of its white beach,
curved as the moon crescent

or ivory when some fine hand
chisels it:
when the sun slips
through the far edge,
there is rare amber
through the sea,
and flecks of it
glitter on the dolphin's back
and jewelled halter
and harness and bit
as he sways under it.

CIRCE

It was easy enough
to bend them to my wish,
it was easy enough
to alter them with a touch,
but you
adrift on the great sea,
how shall I call you back?

Cedar and white ash,
rock-cedar and sand plants
and tamarisk
red cedar and white cedar
and black cedar from the inmost forest,
fragrance upon fragrance
and all of my sea-magic is for nought.

It was easy enough—
a thought called them
from the sharp edges of the earth;
they prayed for a touch,
they cried for the sight of my face,
they entreated me

till in pity
I turned each to his own self.

Panther and panther,
then a black leopard
follows close—
black panther and red
and a great hound,
a god-like beast,
cut the sand in a clear ring
and shut me from the earth,
and cover the sea-sound
with their throats,
and the sea-roar with their own barks
and bellowing and snarls,
and the sea-stars
and the swirl of the sand,
and the rock-tamarisk
and the wind resonance—
but not your voice.

It is easy enough to call men
from the edges of the earth.
It is easy enough to summon them to
my feet
with a thought—
it is beautiful to see the tall panther
and the sleek deer-hounds
circle in the dark.

It is easy enough
to make cedar and white ash fumes
into palaces
and to cover the sea-caves
with ivory and onyx.

But I would give up
rock-fringes of coral
and the inmost chamber
of my island palace
and my own gifts
and the whole region
of my power and magic
for your glance.

LEDA

WHERE the slow river
meets the tide,
a red swan lifts red wings
and darker beak,
and underneath the purple down
of his soft breast
uncurls his coral feet.

Through the deep purple
of the dying heat
of sun and mist,
the level ray of sun-beam
has caressed
the lily with dark breast,
and flecked with richer gold
its golden crest.

Where the slow lifting
of the tide,
floats into the river
and slowly drifts
among the reeds,

and lifts the yellow flags,
he floats
where tide and river meet.

Ah kingly kiss—
no more regret
nor old deep memories
to mar the bliss;
where the low sedge is thick,
the gold day-lily
outspreads and rests
beneath soft fluttering
of red swan wings
and the warm quivering
of the red swan's breast.

HIPPOLYTUS TEMPORIZES

I WORSHIP the greatest first—
(it were sweet, the couch,
the brighter ripple of cloth
over the dipped fleece;
the thought: her bones
under the flesh are white
as sand which along a beach
covers but keeps the print
of the crescent shapes beneath:
I thought:
between cloth and fleece,
so her body lies.)

I worship first, the great—
(ah, sweet, your eyes—
what God, invoked in Crete,
gave them the gift to part
as the Sidonian myrtle-flower
suddenly, wide and swart,
then swiftly,
the eye-lids having provoked our hearts—
as suddenly beat and close.)

I worship the feet, flawless,
that haunt the hills—
(ah, sweet, dare I think,
beneath fetter of golden clasp,
of the rhythm, the fall and rise
of yours, carven, slight
beneath straps of gold that keep
their slender beauty caught,
like wings and bodies
of trapped birds.)

I worship the greatest first—
(suddenly into my brain—
the flash of sun on the snow,
the fringe of light and the drift,
the crest and the hill-shadow—
ah, surely now I forget,
ah splendour, my goddess turns:
or was it the sudden heat,
beneath quivering of molten flesh,
of veins, purple as violets?)

CUCKOO SONG

Ah, bird,
our love is never spent
with your clear note,
nor satiate our soul;
not song, not wail, not hurt,
but just a call summons us
with its simple top-note
and soft fall;

not to some rarer heaven
of lilies over-tall,
nor tuberose set against
some sun-lit wall,
but to a gracious
cedar-palace hall;

not marble set with purple
hung with roses and tall
sweet lilies—such
as the nightingale
would summon for us
with her wail—

(surely only unhappiness
could thrill
such a rich madrigal!)
not she, the nightingale
can fill our souls
with such a wistful joy as this:

nor, bird, so sweet
was ever a swallow note—
not hers, so perfect
with the wing of lazuli
and bright breast—
nor yet the oriole
filling with melody
from her fiery throat
some island-orchard
in a purple sea.

Ah dear, ah gentle bird,
you spread warm length
of crimson wool
and tinted woven stuff
for us to rest upon,
nor numb with ecstasy
nor drown with death:

only you soothe, make still
the throbbing of our brain:
so through her forest trees,

when all her hope was gone
and all her pain,
Calypso heard your call—
across the gathering drift
of burning cedar-wood,
across the low-set bed
of wandering parsley and violet,
when all her hope was dead.

THE ISLANDS

I

WHAT are the islands to me,
what is Greece,
what is Rhodes, Samos, Chios,
what is Paros facing west,
what is Crete?

What is Samothrace,
rising like a ship,
what is Imbros rending the storm-waves
with its breast?

What is Naxos, Paros, Milos,
what the circle about Lycia,
what, the Cyclades'
white necklace?

What is Greece—
Sparta, rising like a rock,
Thebes, Athens,
what is Corinth?

What is Euboia
with its island violets,
what is Euboia, spread with grass,
set with swift shoals,
what is Crete?

What are the islands to me,
what is Greece?

II

What can love of land give to me
that you have not—
what do the tall Spartans know,
and gentler Attic folk?

What has Sparta and her women
more than this?

What are the islands to me
if you are lost—
what is Naxos, Tinos, Andros,
and Delos, the clasp
of the white necklace?

III

What can love of land give to me
that you have not,

what can love of strife break in me
that you have not?

Though Sparta enter Athens,
Thebes wrack Sparta,
each changes as water,
salt, rising to wreak terror
and fall back.

IV

"What has love of land given to you
that I have not?"

I have questioned Tyrians
where they sat
on the black ships,
weighted with rich stuffs,
I have asked the Greeks
from the white ships,
and Greeks from ships whose hulks
lay on the wet sand, scarlet
with great beaks.
I have asked bright Tyrians
and tall Greeks—
"what has love of land given you?"
And they answered—"peace."

V

But beauty is set apart,
beauty is cast by the sea,
a barren rock,
beauty is set about
with wrecks of ships,
upon our coast, death keeps
the shallows—death waits
clutching toward us
from the deeps.

Beauty is set apart;
the winds that slash its beach,
swirl the coarse sand
upward toward the rocks.

Beauty is set apart
from the islands
and from Greece.

VI

In my garden
the winds have beaten
the ripe lilies;
in my garden, the salt
has wilted the first flakes
of young narcissus,

and the lesser hyacinth,
and the salt has crept
under the leaves of the white hyacinth.

In my garden
even the wind-flowers lie flat,
broken by the wind at last.

VII

What are the islands to me
if you are lost,
what is Paros to me
if your eyes draw back,
what is Milos
if you take fright of beauty,
terrible, torturous, isolated,
a barren rock?

What is Rhodes, Crete,
what is Paros facing west,
what, white Imbros?

What are the islands to me
if you hesitate,
what is Greece if you draw back
from the terror
and cold splendour of song
and its bleak sacrifice?

AT BAIA

I SHOULD have thought
in a dream you would have brought
some lovely, perilous thing,
orchids piled in a great sheath,
as who would say (in a dream)
I send you this,
who left the blue veins
of your throat unkissed.

Why was it that your hands
(that never took mine)
your hands that I could see
drift over the orchid heads
so carefully,
your hands, so fragile, sure to lift
so gently, the fragile flower stuff—
ah, ah, how was it

You never sent (in a dream)
the very form, the very scent,
not heavy, not sensuous,
but perilous—perilous—
of orchids, piled in a great sheath,

and folded underneath on a bright scroll
some word:

Flower sent to flower;
for white hands, the lesser white,
less lovely of flower leaf,

or

Lover to lover, no kiss,
no touch, but forever and ever this.

SEA HEROES

CRASH on crash of the sea,
straining to wreck men, sea-boards, continents,
raging against the world, furious,
stay at last, for against your fury
and your mad fight,
the line of heroes stands, god-like:

Akroneos, Oknolos, Elatreus,
helm-of-boat, loosener-of-helm, dweller-by-sea,
Nauteus, sea-man,
Prumneos, stern-of-ship,
Agchialos, sea-girt,
Elatreus, oar-shaft:
lover-of-the-sea, lover-of-the-sea-ebb,
lover-of-the-swift-sea,
Ponteus, Proreus, Ooos:
Anabesneos, one caught between
wave-shock and wave-shock:
Eurualos, broad sea-wrack,
like Ares, man's death,
and Naubolides, best in shape,
of all first in size:
Phaekous, seas' thunderbolt—

ah, crash on crash of great names—
man-tamer, man's-help, perfect Laodamos:
and last the sons of great Alkinoos,
Laodamos, Halios and god-like Clytomeos.

Of all nations, of all cities,
of all continents,
she is favoured among the rest,
for she gives men as great as the sea,
valorous to the fight,
to battle against the elements and evil:
greater even than the sea,
they live beyond wrack and death of cities,
and each god-like name spoken
is as a shrine in a godless place.

But to name you,
we reverent are breathless,
weak with pain and old loss,
and exile and despair—
our hearts break but to speak
your name, Oknaleos—
and may we but call you in the feverish wrack
of our storm-strewn beach, Eretmeos,
and our hurt is quiet and our hearts tamed,
as the sea may yet be tamed,
and we vow to float great ships,
named for each hero,
and oar-blades, cut out of mountain-trees

as such men might have shaped:
Eretmeos and the sea is swept,
baffled by the lordly shape,
Akroneos has pines for his ship's keel;
to love, to mate the sea?
Ah there is Ponteos,
the very deeps roar,
hailing you dear—
they clamour to Ponteos,
and to Proeos
leap, swift to kiss, to curl, to creep,
lover to mistress.

What wave, what love, what foam,
for Ooos who moves swift as the sea?
Ah stay, my heart, the weight
of lovers, of loneliness
drowns me,
alas that their very names
so press to break my heart
with heart-sick weariness,
what would they be,
the very gods,
rearing their mighty length
beside the unharvested sea?

FRAGMENT 113

"Neither honey nor bee for me."
—SAPPHO.

NOT honey,
not the plunder of the bee
from meadow or sand-flower
or mountain bush;
from winter-flower or shoot
born of the later heat:
not honey, not the sweet
stain on the lips and teeth:
not honey, not the deep
plunge of soft belly
and the clinging of the gold-edged
pollen-dusted feet;

though rapture blind my eyes,
and hunger crisp
dark and inert my mouth,
not honey, not the south,
not the tall stalk
of red twin-lilies,
nor light branch of fruit tree
caught in flexible light branch;

not honey, not the south;
ah flower of purple iris,
flower of white,
or of the iris, withering the grass—
for fleck of the sun's fire,
gathers such heat and power,
that shadow-print is light,
cast through the petals
of the yellow iris flower;

not iris—old desire—old passion—
old forgetfulness—old pain—
not this, nor any flower,
but if you turn again,
seek strength of arm and throat,
touch as the god;
neglect the lyre-note;
knowing that you shall feel,
about the frame,
no trembling of the string
but heat, more passionate
of bone and the white shell
and fiery tempered steel.

EVADNE

I FIRST tasted under Apollo's lips
love and love sweetness,
I Evadne;
my hair is made of crisp violets
or hyacinth which the wind combs back
across some rock shelf;
I Evadne
was mate of the god of light.

His hair was crisp to my mouth
as the flower of the crocus,
across my cheek,
cool as the silver cress
on Erotos bank;
between my chin and throat
his mouth slipped over and over.

Still between my arm and shoulder,
I feel the brush of his hair,
and my hands keep the gold they took
as they wandered over and over
that great arm-full of yellow flowers.

SONG

You are as gold
as the half-ripe grain
that merges to gold again,
as white as the white rain
that beats through
the half-opened flowers
of the great flower tufts
thick on the black limbs
of an Illyrian apple bough.

Can honey distill such fragrance
as your bright hair—
for your face is as fair as rain,
yet as rain that lies clear
on white honey-comb,
lends radiance to the white wax,
so your hair on your brow
casts light for a shadow.

WHY HAVE YOU SOUGHT?

WHY have you sought the Greeks, Eros,
when such delight was yours
in the far depth of sky:
there you could note bright ivory
take colour where she bent her face,
and watch fair gold shed gold
on radiant surface of porch and pillar:
and ivory and bright gold,
polished and lustrous grow faint
beside that wondrous flesh
and print of her foot-hold:
Love, why do you tempt the Grecian porticoes?

Here men are bent with thought
and women waste fair moments
gathering lint and pricking coloured stuffs
to mar their breasts,
while she, adored,
wastes not her fingers,
worn of fire and sword,
wastes not her touch
on linen and fine thread,
wastes not her head

in thought and pondering,
Love, why have you sought the horde
of spearsmen, why the tent
Achilles pitched beside the river-ford?

WHITE WORLD

THE whole white world is ours,
and the world, purple with rose-bays,
bays, bush on bush,
group, thicket, hedge and tree,
dark islands in a sea
of grey-green olive or wild white-olive,
cut with the sudden cypress shafts,
in clusters, two or three,
or with one slender, single cypress-tree.

Slid from the hill,
as crumbling snow-peaks slide,
citron on citron fill
the valley, and delight
waits till our spirits tire
of forest, grove and bush
and purple flower of the laurel-tree.

Yet not one wearies,
joined is each to each
in happiness complete
with bush and flower:

ours is the wind-breath
at the hot noon-hour,
ours is the bee's soft belly
and the blush of the rose-petal,
lifted, of the flower.

PHAEDRA

THINK, O my soul,
of the red sand of Crete;
think of the earth; the heat
burnt fissures like the great
backs of the temple serpents;
think of the world you knew;
as the tide crept, the land
burned with a lizard-blue
where the dark sea met the sand.

Think, O my soul—
what power has struck you blind—
is there no desert-root, no forest-berry
pine-pitch or knot of fir
known that can help the soul
caught in a force, a power,
passionless, not its own?

So I scatter, so implore
Gods of Crete, summoned before
with slighter craft;
ah, hear my prayer:

Grant to my soul
the body that it wore,
trained to your thought,
that kept and held your power,
as the petal of black poppy,
the opiate of the flower.

For art undreamt in Crete,
strange art and dire,
in counter-charm prevents my charm
limits my power:
pine-cone I heap,
grant answer to my prayer.

No more, my soul—
as the black cup, sullen and dark with fire,
burns till beside it, noon's bright heat
is withered, filled with dust—
and into that noon-heat
grown drab and stale,
suddenly wind and thunder and swift rain,
till the scarlet flower is wrecked
in the slash of the white hail.

The poppy that my heart was,
formed to bind all mortals,
made to strike and gather hearts
like flame upon an altar,
fades and shrinks, a red leaf
drenched and torn in the cold rain.

SHE CONTRASTS WITH HERSELF
HIPPOLYTA

CAN flame beget white steel—
ah no, it could not take
within my reins its shelter;
steel must seek steel,
or hate make out of joy
a whet-stone for a sword;
sword against flint,
Theseus sought Hippolyta;
she yielded not nor broke,
sword upon stone,
from the clash leapt a spark,
Hippolytus, born of hate.

What did she think
when all her strength
was twisted for his bearing;
did it break,
even within her sheltered heart, a song,
some whispered note,
distant and faint as this:

Love that I bear
within my breast
how is my armour melted
how my heart:
as an oak-tree
that keeps beneath the snow,
the young bark fresh
till the spring cast
from off its shoulders
the white snow
so does my armour melt.

Love that I bear
within my heart, O speak;
tell how beneath the serpent-spotted shell,
the cygnets wait,
how the soft owl
opens and flicks with pride,
eye-lids of great bird-eyes,
when underneath its breast
the owlets shrink and turn.

You have the power,
(then did she say) Artemis,
benignity to grant
forgivenèss that I gave
no quarter to an enemy who cast
his armour on the forest-moss,
and took, unmatched in an uneven contest,

Hippolyta who relented not,
returned and sought no kiss.

Then did she pray: Artemis,
grant that no flower
be grafted alien on a broken stalk,
no dark flame-laurel on the stricken crest
of a wild mountain-poplar;
grant in my thought,
I never yield but wait,
entreating cold white river,
mountain-pool and salt:
let all my veins be ice,
until they break
(strength of white beach,
rock of mountain land,
forever to you, Artemis, dedicate)
from out my reins,
those small, cold hands.

SHE REBUKES HIPPOLYTA

WAS she so chaste?

Swift and a broken rock
clatters across the steep shelf
of the mountain slope,
sudden and swift
and breaks as it clatters down
into the hollow breach
of the dried water-course:
far and away
(though fire I see it,
and smoke of the dead, withered stalks
of the wild cistus-brush)
Hippolyta, frail and wild,
galloping up the slope
between great boulder and rock
and group and cluster of rock.

Was she so chaste,
(I see it, sharp, this vision,
and each fleck on the horse's flanks
of foam, and bridle and bit,
silver, and the straps,

wrought with their perfect art,
and the sun,
striking athwart the silver-work,
and the neck, strained forward, ears alert,
and the head of a girl
flung back and her throat.)

Was she so chaste—
(Ah, burn my fire, I ask
out of the smoke-ringed darkness
enclosing the flaming disk
of my vision)
I ask for a voice to answer:
was she chaste?

Who can say—
the broken ridge of the hills
was the line of a lover's shoulder,
his arm-turn, the path to the hills,
the sudden leap and swift thunder
of mountain boulders, his laugh.

She was mad—
as no priest, no lover's cult
could grant madness;
the wine that entered her throat
with the touch of the mountain rocks
was white, intoxicant:
she, the chaste,

was betrayed by the glint
of light on the hills,
the granite splinter of rocks,
the touch of the stone
where heat melts
toward the shadow-side of the rocks.

EGYPT

EGYPT had cheated us,
for Egypt took
through guile and craft
our treasure and our hope,
Egypt had maimed us,
offered dream for life,
an opiate for a kiss,
and death for both.

White poison flower we loved
and the black spike
of an ungarnered bush—
(a spice—or without taste—
we wondered—then we asked
others to take and sip
and watched their death)
Egypt we loved, though hate
should have withheld our touch.

Egypt had given us knowledge,
and we took, blindly,
through want of heart,

what Egypt brought;
knowing all poison,
what was that or this,
more or less perilous,
than this or that.

We pray you, Egypt,
by what perverse fate,
has poison brought with knowledge,
given us this—
not days of trance,
shadow, fore-doom of death,
but passionate grave thought,
belief enhanced,
ritual returned and magic;

Even in the uttermost black pit
of the forbidden knowledge,
wisdom's glance,
the grey eyes following
in the mid-most desert—
great shaft of rose,
fire shed across our path,
upon the face grown grey, a light,
Hellas re-born from death.

PRAYER

WHITE, O white face—
from disenchanted days
wither alike dark rose
and fiery bays:
no gift within our hands,
nor strength to praise,
only defeat and silence;
though we lift hands, disenchanted,
of small strength, nor raise
branch of the laurel
or the light of torch,
but fold the garment
on the riven locks,
yet hear, all-merciful, and touch
the fore-head, dim, unlit of pride and thought,
Mistress—be near!

Give back the glamour to our will,
the thought; give back the tool,
the chisel; once we wrought
things not unworthy,
sandal and steel-clasp;

silver and steel, the coat
with white leaf-pattern
at the arm and throat:
silver and metal, hammered for the ridge
of shield and helmet-rim;
white silver with the darker hammered in,
belt, staff and magic spear-shaft
with the gilt spark at the point and hilt.

HELIOS

HELIOS makes all things right:—
night brands and chokes
as if destruction broke
over furze and stone and crop
of myrtle-shoot and field-wort,
destroyed with flakes of iron,
the bracken-stems,
where tender roots were sown,
blight, chaff and waste
of darkness to choke and drown.

A curious god to find,
yet in the end faithful;
bitter, the Kyprian's feet—
ah flecks of whited clay,
great hero, vaunted lord—
ah petal, dust and wind-fall
on the ground—queen awaiting queen.

Better the weight, they tell,
the helmet's beaten shell,
Athene's riven steel,

caught over the white skull,
Athene sets to heal
the few who merit it.

Yet even then, what help,
should he not turn and note
the height of forehead and the mark
of conquest,
draw near and try the helmet;
to left—reset the crown
Athene weighted down,
or break with a light touch
mayhap the steel set to protect;
to slay or heal.

A treacherous god, they say,
yet who would wait to test
justice or worth or right,
when through a fetid night
is wafted faint and nearer—
then straight as point of steel
to one who courts swift death,
scent of Hesperidean orange-spray.

HELIODORA

And Other Poems

NOTE

The poem Lais has in italics a translation of the Plato epigram in the Greek Anthology. Heliodora has in italics the two Meleager epigrams from the Anthology. In Nossis is the translation of the opening lines of the Garland of Meleager and the poem of Nossis herself in the Greek Anthology. The four Sappho fragments are re-worked freely. The Ion is a translation of the latter part of the first long choros of the Ion of Euripides.

WASH OF COLD RIVER

Wash of cold river
in a glacial land,
Ionian water,
chill, snow-ribbed sand,
drift of rare flowers,
clear, with delicate shell-
like leaf enclosing
frozen lily-leaf,
camellia texture,
colder than a rose;

wind-flower
that keeps the breath
of the north-wind—
these and none other;

intimate thoughts and kind
reach out to share
the treasure of my mind,
intimate hands and dear
draw garden-ward and sea-ward
all the sheer rapture

that I would take
to mould a clear
and frigid statue;

rare, of pure texture,
beautiful space and line,
marble to grace
your inaccessible shrine.

HOLY SATYR

Most holy Satyr,
like a goat,
with horns and hooves
to match thy coat
of russet brown,
I make leaf-circlets
and a crown of honey-flowers
for thy throat;
where the amber petals
drip to ivory,
I cut and slip
each stiffened petal
in the rift
of carven petal;
honey horn
has wed the bright
virgin petal of the white
flower cluster: lip to lip
let them whisper,
let them lilt, quivering.

Most holy Satyr,
like a goat,

hear this our song,
accept our leaves,
love-offering,
return our hymn,
like echo fling
a sweet song,
answering note for note.

LAIS

Let her who walks in Paphos
take the glass,
let Paphos take the mirror
and the work of frosted fruit,
gold apples set
with silver apple-leaf,
white leaf of silver
wrought with vein of gilt.

Let Paphos lift the mirror,
let her look
into the polished centre of the disk.

Let Paphos take the mirror;
did she press
flowerlet of flame-flower
to the lustrous white
of the white forehead?
did the dark veins beat
a deeper purple
than the wine-deep tint
of the dark flower?

Did she deck black hair
one evening, with the winter-white
flower of the winter-berry,
did she look (reft of her lover)
at a face gone white
under the chaplet
of white virgin-breath?

Lais, exultant, tyrannizing Greece,
Lais who kept her lovers in the porch,
lover on lover waiting,
(but to creep
where the robe brushed the threshold
where still sleeps Lais)
so she creeps, Lais,
to lay her mirror at the feet
of her who reigns in Paphos.

Lais has left her mirror
for she sees no longer in its depth
the Lais' self
that laughed exultant
tyrannizing Greece.

Lais has left her mirror,
for she weeps no longer,
finding in its depth,
a face, but other
than dark flame and white
feature of perfect marble.

Lais has left her mirror,
(so one wrote)
to her who reigns in Paphos;
Lais who laughed a tyrant over Greece,
Lais who turned the lovers from the porch,
that swarm for whom now
Lais has no use;
Lais is now no lover of the glass,
seeing no more the face as once it was,
wishing to see that face and finding this.

HELIODORA

He and I sought together,
over the spattered table,
rhymes and flowers,
gifts for a name.

He said, among others,
I will bring
(and the phrase was just and good,
but not as good as mine,)
"the narcissus that loves the rain."

We strove for a name,
while the light of the lamps burnt thin
and the outer dawn came in,
a ghost, the last at the feast
or the first,
to sit within
with the two that remained
to quibble in flowers and verse
over a girl's name.

He said, "the rain, loving,"
I said, "the narcissus, drunk,
drunk with the rain."

Yet I had lost
for he said,
"the rose, the lover's gift,
is loved of love,"
he said it,
"loved of love;"
I waited, even as he spoke,
to see the room filled with a light,
as when in winter
the embers catch in a wind
when a room is dank;
so it would be filled, I thought,
our room with a light
when he said
(and he said it first,)
"the rose, the lover's delight,
is loved of love,"
but the light was the same.

Then he caught,
seeing the fire in my eyes,
my fire, my fever, perhaps,
for he leaned
with the purple wine
stained on his sleeve,
and said this:
"did you ever think
a girl's mouth
caught in a kiss,

is a lily that laughs?"

I had not.
I saw it now
as men must see it forever afterwards;
no poet could write again,
"the red-lily,
a girl's laugh caught in a kiss;"
it was his to pour in the vat
from which all poets dip and quaff,
for poets are brothers in this.

So I saw the fire in his eyes,
it was almost my fire,
(he was younger,)
I saw the face so white,
my heart beat,
it was almost my phrase;
I said, "surprise the muses,
take them by surprise;
it is late,
rather it is dawn-rise,
those ladies sleep, the nine,
our own king's mistresses."

A name to rhyme,
flowers to bring to a name,
what was one girl faint and shy,
with eyes like the myrtle,

(I said: "her underlids
are rather like myrtle,")
to vie with the nine?

Let him take the name,
he had the rhymes,
"the rose, loved of love,
the lily, a mouth that laughs,"
he had the gift,
"the scented crocus,
the purple hyacinth,"
what was one girl to the nine?

He said:
"I will make her a wreath;"
he said:
"I will write it thus:

I will bring you the lily that laughs,
I will twine
with soft narcissus, the myrtle,
sweet crocus, white violet,
the purple hyacinth, and last,
the rose, loved-of-love,
that these may drip on your hair
the less soft flowers,
may mingle sweet with the sweet
of Heliodora's locks,
myrrh-curled."

(He wrote myrrh-curled,
I think, the first.)

I said:
"they sleep, the nine,"
when he shouted swift and passionate:
"*that* for the nine!
above the hills
the sun is about to wake,
and to-day white violets
shine beside white lilies
adrift on the mountain side;
to-day the narcissus opens
that loves the rain."

I watched him to the door,
catching his robe
as the wine-bowl crashed to the floor,
spilling a few wet lees,
(ah, his purple hyacinth!)
I saw him out of the door,
I thought:
there will never be a poet
in all the centuries after this,
who will dare write,
after my friend's verse,
"a girl's mouth
is a lily kissed."

HELEN

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre as of olives
where she stands,
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
remembering past enchantments
and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,
God's daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
could love indeed the maid,
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

NOSSIS

I THOUGHT to hear him speak
the girl might rise
and make the garden silver,
as the white moon breaks,
"Nossis," he cried, "a flame."

I said:
"a girl that's dead
some hundred years;
a poet—what of that?
for in the islands,
in the haunts of Greek Ionia,
Rhodes and Cyprus,
girls are cheap."

I said, to test his mood,
to make him rage or laugh or sing or weep,
"in Greek Ionia and in Cyprus,
many girls are found
with wreaths and apple-branches."

"Only a hundred years or two or three,
has she lain dead

yet men forget;"
he said,
"I want a garden,"
and I thought
he wished to make a terrace on the hill,
bend the stream to it,
set out daffodils,
plant Phrygian violets,
such was his will and whim,
I thought,
to name and watch each flower.

His was no garden
bright with Tyrian violets,
his was a shelter
wrought of flame and spirit,
and as he flung her name
against the dark,
I thought the iris-flowers
that lined the path
must be the ghost of Nossis.

"Who made the wreath,
for what man was it wrought?
speak, fashioned all of fruit-buds,
song, my loveliest,
say Meleager brought to Diocles,
(a gift for that enchanting friend)
memories with names of poets.

He sought for Moero, lilies,
and those many,
red-lilies for Anyte,
for Sappho, roses,
with those few, he caught
that breath of the sweet-scented
leaf of iris,
the myrrh-iris,
to set beside the tablet
and the wax
which Love had burnt,
when scarred across by Nossis:"

when she wrote:

"I Nossis stand by this:
I state that love is sweet:
if you think otherwise
assert what beauty
or what charm
after the charm of love,
retains its grace?

"Honey," you say:
honey? I say "I spit
honey out of my mouth:
nothing is second-best
after the sweet of Eros."

I Nossis stand and state
that he whom Love neglects
has naught, no flower, no grace,
who lacks that rose, her kiss."

I thought to hear him speak
the girl might rise
and make the garden silver
as the white moon breaks,
"Nossis," he cried, "a flame."

CENTAUR SONG

Now that the day is done,
now that the night creeps soft
and dims the chestnut clusters'
radiant spike of flower,
O sweet, till dawn
break through the branches
of our orchard-garden,
rest in this shelter
of the osier-wood and thorn.

They fall,
the apple-flowers;
nor softer grace has Aphrodite
in the heaven afar,
nor at so fair a pace
open the flower-petals
as your face bends down,
while, breath on breath,
your mouth wanders
from my mouth o'er my face.

What have I left
to bring you in this place,

already sweet with violets?
(those you brought
with swathes of earliest grass,
forest and meadow balm,
flung from your giant arms
for us to rest upon.)

Fair are these petals
broken by your feet;
your horse's hooves
tread softer than a deer's;
your eyes, startled,
are like the deer eyes
while your heart
trembles more than the deer.

O earth, O god,
O forest, stream or river,
what shall I bring
that all the day hold back,
that Dawn remember Love
and rest upon her bed,
and Zeus, forgetful not of Danæ or Maia,
bid the stars shine forever.

THETIS

He had asked for immortal life
in the old days and had grown old,
now he had aged apace,
he asked for his youth,
and I, Thetis, granted him

freedom under the sea
drip and welter of weeds,
the drift of the fringing grass,
the gift of the never-withering moss,
and the flowering reed,

and most,
beauty of fifty nereids,
sisters of nine,
I one of their least,
yet great and a goddess,
granted Pelius,

love under the sea,
beauty, grace infinite:

so I crept, at last,
a crescent, a curve of a wave,
(a man would have thought,
had he watched for his nets
on the beach)
a dolphin, a glistening fish,
that burnt and caught for its light,
the light of the undercrest
of the lifting tide,
a fish with silver for breast,
with no light but the light
of the sea it reflects.

Little he would have guessed,
(had such a one
watched by his nets,)
that a goddess flung from the crest
of the wave the blue of its own
bright tress of hair,
the blue of the painted stuff
it wore for dress.

No man would have known save he,
whose coming I sensed as I strung
my pearl and agate and pearl,
to mark the beat and the stress
of the lilt of my song.

Who dreams of a son,
save one,

childless, having no bright
face to flatter its own,
who dreams of a son?

Nereids under the sea,
my sisters, fifty and one,
(counting myself)
they dream of a child
of water and sea,
with hair of the softest,
to lie along the curve
of fragile, tiny bones,
yet more beautiful each than each,
hair more bright and long,
to rival its own.

Nereids under the wave,
who dreams of a son
save I, Thetis, alone?

Each would have for a child,
a stray self, furtive and wild,
to dive and leap to the wind,
to wheedle and coax
the stray birds bright and bland
of foreign strands,
to crawl and stretch on the sands,
each would have for its own,
a daughter for child.

Who dreams, who sings of a son?
I, Thetis, alone.

When I had finished my song,
and dropped the last seed-pearl,
and flung the necklet
about my throat
and found it none too bright,
not bright enough nor pale
enough, not like the moon that creeps
beneath the sea,
between the lift of crest and crest,
had tried it on
and found it not
quite fair enough
to fill the night
of my blue folds of bluest dress
with moon for light,
I cast the beads aside and leapt,
myself all blue
with no bright gloss
of pearls for crescent light;

but one alert, all blue and wet,
I flung myself, an arrow's flight,
straight upward
through the blue of night
that was my palace wall,
and crept to where I saw the mark
of feet, a rare foot-fall:

Achilles' sandal on the beach,
could one mistake?
perhaps a lover or a nymph,
lost from the tangled fern and brake,
that lines the upper shelf of land,
perhaps a goddess or a nymph
might so mistake
Achilles' footprint for the trace
of a bright god alert to track
the panther where he slinks for thirst
across the sand;

perhaps a goddess or a nymph,
might think a god had crossed the track
of weed and drift,
had broken here this stem of reed,
had turned this sea-shell to the light:

so she must stoop, this goddess girl,
or nymph, with crest of blossoming wood
about her hair for cap or crown,
must stoop and kneel and bending down,
must kiss the print of such a one.

Not I, the mother, Thetis self,
I stretched and lay, a river's slim
dark length,
a rivulet where it leaves the wood,
and meets the sea,
I lay along the burning sand,
a river's blue.

AT ITHACA

Over and back,
the long waves crawl
and track the sand with foam;
night darkens and the sea
takes on that desperate tone
of dark that wives put on
when all their love is done.

Over and back,
the tangled thread falls slack,
over and up and on;
over and all is sewn;
now while I bind the end,
I wish some fiery friend
would sweep impetuously
these fingers from the loom.

My weary thoughts
play traitor to my soul,
just as the toil is over;
swift while the woof is whole,
turn now my spirit, swift,
and tear the pattern there,
the flowers so deftly wrought,

the border of sea-blue,
the sea-blue coast of home.

The web was over-fair,
that web of pictures there,
enchantments that I thought
he had, that I had lost;
weaving his happiness
within the stitching frame,
weaving his fire and fame,
I thought my work was done,
I prayed that only one
of those that I had spurned,
might stoop and conquer this
long waiting with a kiss.

But each time that I see
my work so beautifully
inwoven and would keep
the picture and the whole,
Athene steels my soul,
slanting across my brain,
I see as shafts of rain
his chariot and his shafts,
I see the arrows fall,
I see my lord who moves
like Hector, lord of love,
I see him matched with fair
bright rivals and I see
those lesser rivals flee.

WE TWO

We two are left:
I with small grace reveal
distaste and bitterness;
you with small patience
take my hands;
though effortless,
you scald their weight
as a bowl, lined with embers,
wherein droop
great petals of white rose,
forced by the heat
too soon to break.

We two are left:
as a blank wall, the world,
earth and the men who talk,
saying their space of life
is good and gracious,
with eyes blank
as that blank surface
their ignorance mistakes
for final shelter
and a resting-place.

We two remain:
yet by what miracle,
searching within the tangles of my brain,
I ask again,
have we two met within
this maze of dædal paths
in-wound mid grievous stone,
where once I stood alone?

FRAGMENT THIRTY-SIX

I know not what to do:
my mind is divided.
—SAPPHO.

I KNOW not what to do,
my mind is reft:
is song's gift best?
is love's gift loveliest?
I know not what to do,
now sleep has pressed
weight on your eyelids.

Shall I break your rest,
devouring, eager?
is love's gift best?
nay, song's the loveliest:
yet were you lost,
what rapture
could I take from song?
what song were left?

I know not what to do:
to turn and slake

the rage that burns,
with my breath burn
and trouble your cool breath?
so shall I turn and take
snow in my arms?
(is love's gift best?)
yet flake on flake
of snow were comfortless,
did you lie wondering,
wakened yet unawake.

Shall I turn and take
comfortless snow within my arms?
press lips to lips
that answer not,
press lips to flesh
that shudders not nor breaks?

Is love's gift best?
shall I turn and slake
all the wild longing?
O I am eager for you!
as the Pleiads shake
white light in whiter water
so shall I take you?

My mind is quite divided,
my minds hesitate,
so perfect matched,

I know not what to do:
each strives with each
as two white wrestlers
standing for a match,
ready to turn and clutch
yet never shake muscle nor nerve
nor tendon;
so my mind waits
to grapple with my mind,
yet I lie quiet,
I would seem at rest.

I know not what to do:
strain upon strain,
sound surging upon sound
makes my brain blind;
as a wave-line may wait to fall
yet (waiting for its falling)
still the wind may take
from off its crest,
white flake on flake of foam,
that rises,
seeming to dart and pulse
and rend the light,
so my mind hesitates
above the passion
quivering yet to break,
so my mind hesitates

above my mind,
listening to song's delight.

I know not what to do:
will the sound break,
rending the night
with rift on rift of rose
and scattered light?
will the sound break at last
as the wave hesitant,
or will the whole night pass
and I lie listening awake?

FLUTE SONG

LITTLE scavenger away,
touch not the door,
beat not the portal down,
cross not the sill,
silent until
my song, bright and shrill,
breathes out its lay.

Little scavenger avaunt,
tempt me with jeer and taunt,
yet you will wait to-day;
for it were surely ill
to mock and shout and revel;
it were more fit to tell
with flutes and calathes,
your mother's praise.

AFTER TROY

We flung against their gods,
invincible, clear hate;
we fought;
frantic, we flung the last
imperious, desperate shaft

and lost:
we knew the loss
before they ever guessed
fortune had tossed to them
her favour and her whim;
but how were we depressed?
we lost yet as we pressed
our spearsmen on their best,
we knew their line invincible
because there fell
on them no shiverings
of the white enchantress,
radiant Aphrodite's spell:

we hurled our shafts of passion,
noblest hate,

and knew their cause was blest,
and knew their gods were nobler,
better taught in skill,
subtler with wit of thought,
yet had it been God's will
that *they* not we should fall,
we know those fields had bled
with roses lesser red.

CASSANDRA

O Hymen king.

HYMEN, O Hymen king,
what bitter thing is this?
what shaft, tearing my heart?
what scar, what light, what fire
searing my eye-balls and my eyes with flame?
nameless, O spoken name,
king, lord, speak blameless Hymen.

Why do you blind my eyes?
why do you dart and pulse
till all the dark is home,
then find my soul
and ruthless draw it back?
scaling the scaleless,
opening the dark?
speak, nameless, power and might;
when will you leave me quite?
when will you break my wings
or leave them utterly free
to scale heaven endlessly?

A bitter, broken thing,
my heart, O Hymen lord,
yet neither drought nor sword
baffles men quite,
why must they feign to fear
my virgin glance?
feigned utterly or real
why do they shrink?
my trance frightens them,
breaks the dance,
empties the market place;
if I but pass they fall
back, frantically;
must always people mock?
unless they shrink and reel
as in the temple
at your uttered will.

O Hymen king,
lord, greatest, power, might,
look for my face is dark,
burnt with your light,
your fire, O Hymen lord;
is there none left
can equal me
in ecstasy, desire?
is there none left
can bear with me
the kiss of your white fire?

is there not one,
Phrygian or frenzied Greek,
poet, song-swept, or bard,
one meet to take from me
this bitter power of song,
one fit to speak, Hymen,
your praises, lord?

May I not wed
as you have wed?
may it not break, beauty,
from out my hands, my head, my feet?
may Love not lie beside me
till his heat
burn me to ash?
may he not comfort me, then,
spent of all that fire and heat,
still, ashen-white and cool
as the wet laurels,
white, before your feet
step on the mountain-slope,
before your fiery hand
lift up the mantle
covering flower and land,
as a man lifts,
O Hymen, from his bride,
(cowering with woman eyes,) the veil?
O Hymen lord, be kind.

EPIGRAMS

I

O RUTHLESS, perilous, imperious hate,
you can not thwart
the promptings of my soul,
you can not weaken nay nor dominate
Love that is mateless,
Love the rite,
the whole measure of being:
would you crush with bondage?
nay, you would love me not
were I your slave.

2

Torture me not with this or that or this,
Love is my master,
you his lesser self;
while you are Love,
I love you generously,
be Eros,
not a tyrannous, bitter mate:

Love has no charm
when Love is swept to earth:
you'd make a lop-winged god,
frozen and contrite,
of god up-darting,
winged for passionate flight.

FRAGMENT FORTY

Love . . . bitter-sweet.
—SAPPHO.

I

KEEP love and he wings
with his bow,
up, mocking us,
keep love and he taunts us
and escapes.

Keep love and he sways apart
in another world,
outdistancing us.

Keep love and he mocks,
ah, bitter and sweet,
your sweetness is more cruel
than your hurt.

Honey and salt,
fire burst from the rocks

to meet fire
spilt from Hesperus.

Fire darted aloft and met fire:
in that moment
love entered us.

2

Could Eros be kept?
he were prisoned long since
and sick with imprisonment;
could Eros be kept?
others would have broken
and crushed out his life.

Could Eros be kept?
we too sinning, by Kypris,
might have prisoned him outright.

Could Eros be kept?
nay, thank him and the bright goddess
that he left us.

3

Ah, love is bitter and sweet,
but which is more sweet,
the sweetness

or the bitterness?
none has spoken it.

Love is bitter,
but can salt taint sea-flowers,
grief, happiness?

Is it bitter to give back
love to your lover
if he crave it?

Is it bitter to give back
love to your lover
if he wish it
for a new favourite?
who can say,
or is it sweet?

Is it sweet
to possess utterly?
or is it bitter,
bitter as ash?

4

I had thought myself frail;
a petal,
with light equal
on leaf and under-leaf.

I had thought myself frail;
a lamp,
shell, ivory or crust of pearl,
about to fall shattered,
with flame spent.

I cried:
"I must perish,
I am deserted,
an outcast, desperate
in this darkness,"
(such fire rent me with Hesperus,)
then the day broke.

5

What need of a lamp
when day lightens us,
what need to bind love
when love stands
with such radiant wings
over us?

What need—
yet to sing love,
love must first shatter us.

TOWARD THE PIRÆUS

Slay with your eyes, Greek,
men over the face of the earth,
slay with your eyes, the host,
puny, passionless, weak.

Break as the ranks of steel
broke when the Persian lost:
craven, we hated them then:
now we would count them Gods
beside these, spawn of the earth.

Grant us your mantle, Greek!
grant us but one
to fright (as your eyes) with a sword,
men, craven and weak,
grant us but one to strike
one blow for you, passionate Greek.

I

You would have broken my wings,
but the very fact that you knew

I had wings, set some seal
on my bitter heart, my heart
broke and fluttered and sang.

You would have snared me,
and scattered the strands of my nest;
but the very fact that you saw,
sheltered me, claimed me,
set me apart from the rest

Of men—of *men,* made you a god,
and me, claimed me, set me apart
and the song in my breast,
yours, yours forever—
if I escape your evil heart.

2

I loved you:
men have writ and women have said
they loved,
but as the Pythoness stands by the altar,
intense and may not move,

till the fumes pass over;
and may not falter or break,
till the priest has caught the words
that mar or make
a deme or a ravaged town;

so I, though my knees tremble,
my heart break,
must note the rumbling,
heed only the shuddering
down in the fissure beneath the rock
of the temple floor;

must wait and watch
and may not turn nor move,
nor break from my trance to speak
so slight, so sweet,
so simple a word as love.

3

What had you done
had you been true,
I can not think,
I may not know.

What could we do
were I not wise,
what play invent,
what joy devise?

What could we do
if you were great?

(Yet were you lost,
who were there then,

to circumvent
the tricks of men?)

What can we do,
for curious lies
have filled your heart,
and in my eyes
sorrow has writ
that I am wise.

4

If I had been a boy,
I would have worshipped your grace,
I would have flung my worship
before your feet,
I would have followed apart,
glad, rent with an ecstasy
to watch you turn
your great head, set on the throat,
thick, dark with its sinews,
burned and wrought
like the olive stalk,
and the noble chin
and the throat.

I would have stood,
and watched and watched
and burned,

and when in the night,
from the many hosts, your slaves,
and warriors and serving men
you had turned
to the purple couch and the flame
of the woman, tall like the cypress tree
that flames sudden and swift and free
as with crackle of golden resin
and cones and the locks flung free
like the cypress limbs,
bound, caught and shaken and loosed,
bound, caught and riven and bound
and loosened again,
as in rain of a kingly storm
or wind full from a desert plain.

So, when you had risen
from all the lethargy of love and its heat,
you would have summoned me,
me alone,
and found my hands,
beyond all the hands in the world,
cold, cold, cold,
intolerably cold and sweet.

5

It was not chastity that made me cold nor fear,
only I knew that you, like myself, were sick

of the puny race that crawls and quibbles and lisps
of love and love and lovers and love's deceit.

It was not chastity that made me wild, but fear
that my weapon, tempered in different heat,
was over-matched by yours, and your hand
skilled to yield death-blows, might break

With the slightest turn—no ill will meant—
my own lesser, yet still somewhat fine-wrought,
fiery-tempered, delicate, over-passionate steel.

AT ELEUSIS

What they did,
they did for Dionysos,
for ecstasy's sake:

now take the basket,
think;
think of the moment you count
most foul in your life;
conjure it,
supplicate,
pray to it;
your face is bleak, you retract,
you dare not remember it:

stop;
it is too late.
The next stands by the altar step,
a child's face yet not innocent,
it will prove adequate, but you,
I could have spelt your peril at the gate,
yet for your mind's sake,
though you could not enter,
wait.

What they did,
they did for Dionysos,
for ecstasy's sake:

Now take the basket—
(ah face in a dream,
did I not know your heart,
I would falter,
for each that fares onward
is my child;
ah can you wonder
that my hands shake,
that my knees tremble,
I a mortal, set in the goddess' place?)

FRAGMENT FORTY-ONE

. . . thou flittest to Andromeda.
—SAPPHO.

I

AM I blind alas,
am I blind?
I too have followed
her path.
I too have bent at her feet.
I too have wakened to pluck
amaranth in the straight shaft,
amaranth purple in the cup,
scorched at the edge to white.

Am I blind?
am I the less ready for her sacrifice?
am I the less eager to give
what she asks,
she the shameless and radiant?

Am I quite lost,
I towering above you and her glance,

walking with swifter pace,
with clearer sight,
with intensity
beside which you two
are as spent ash?

Nay, I give back to the goddess the gift
she tendered me in a moment
of great bounty.
I return it. I lay it again
on the white slab of her house,
the beauty she cast out
one moment, careless.

Nor do I cry out:
"why did I stoop?
why did I turn aside
one moment from the rocks
marking the sea-path?
Aphrodite, shameless and radiant,
have pity, turn, answer us."

Ah no—though I stumble toward
her altar-step,
though my flesh is scorched and rent,
shattered, cut apart,
slashed open;
though my heels press my own wet life
black, dark to purple,

on the smooth, rose-streaked
threshold of her pavement.

2

Am I blind alas, deaf too
that my ears lost all this?
nay, O my lover,
shameless and still radiant,
I tell you this:

I was not asleep,
I did not lie asleep on those hot rocks
while you waited.
I was not unaware when I glanced
out toward the sea
watching the purple ships.

I was not blind when I turned.
I was not indifferent when I strayed aside
or loitered as we three went
or seemed to turn a moment from the path
for that same amaranth.

I was not dull and dead when I fell
back on our couch at night.
I was not indifferent when I turned
and lay quiet.
I was not dead in my sleep.

3

Lady of all beauty,
I give you this:
say I have offered small sacrifice,
say I am unworthy your touch,
but say not:
"she turned to some cold, calm god,
silent, pitiful, in preference."

Lady of all beauty,
I give you this:
say not:
"she deserted my altar-step,
the fire on my white hearth
was too great,
she fell back at my first glance."

Lady, radiant and shameless,
I have brought small wreaths,
(they were a child's gift,)
I have offered myrrh-leaf,
crisp lentisk,
I have laid rose-petal
and white rock-rose from the beach.

But I give now a greater,
I give life and spirit with this.
I render a grace

no one has dared to speak,
lest men at your altar greet him
as slave, callous to your art;
I dare more than the singer
offering her lute,
the girl her stained veils,
the woman her swathes of birth,
or pencil and chalk,
mirror and unguent box.

I offer more than the lad
singing at your steps,
praise of himself,
his mirror his friend's face,
more than any girl,
I offer you this:
(grant only strength
that I withdraw not my gift,)
I give you my praise and this:
the love of my lover
for his mistress.

TELESILA

In Argos—that statue of her;
at her feet the scroll of her
love-poetry, in her hand a helmet.

War is a fevered god
who takes alike
maiden and king and clod,
and yet another one,
(ah withering peril!)
deprives alike,
with equal skill,
alike indifferently,
hoar spearsman of his shaft,
wan maiden of her zone,
even he,
Love who is great War's
very over-lord.

War bent
and kissed the forehead,
yet Love swift,
planted on chin
and tenderest cyclamen lift

of fragrant mouth,
fevered and honeyed breath,
breathing o'er and o'er
those tendrils of her hair,
soft kisses
like bright flowers.

Love took
and laid the sweet,
(being extravagant,)
on lip and chin and cheek,
but, ah, he failed
even he,
before the luminous eyes
that dart
no suave appeal,
alas, impelling me
to brave incontinent,
grave Pallas' high command.

And yet the mouth!
ah Love ingratiate,
how was it you,
so poignant, swift and sure,
could not have taken all
and left me free,
free to desert the Argives,
let them burn,
free yet to turn

and let the city fall:
yea, let high War
take all his vengeful way,
for what am I?
I cannot save nor stay
the city's fall.

War is a fevered god,
(yet who has writ as she
the power of Love?)
War bent and kissed the forehead,
that bright brow,
ignored the chin
and the sweet mouth,
for that and the low laugh were his,
Eros ingratiate,
who sadly missed
in all the kisses count,
those eyebrows
and swart eyes,
O valiant one
who bowed
falsely and vilely trapped us
traitorous lord.

And yet,
(remembrance mocks,)
should I have bent the maiden
to a kiss?

Ares the lover
or enchanting Love?
but had I moved
I feared
for that astute regard;
for that bright vision,
how might I have erred?
I might have marred and swept
another not so sweet
into my exile;
I might have kept a look
recalling many and many a woman's look,
not this alone,
astute, imperious, proud.

And yet
I turn and ask
again, again, again,
who march to death,
what was it worth,
reserve and pride and hurt?
what is it worth
to such as I
who turn to meet
the invincible Spartans'
massed and serried host?
what had it cost, a kiss?

FRAGMENT SIXTY-EIGHT

. . . even in the house of Hades.
—SAPPHO.

I

I ENVY you your chance of death,
how I envy you this.
I am more covetous of him
even than of your glance,
I wish more from his presence
though he torture me in a grasp,
terrible, intense.

Though he clasp me in an embrace
that is set against my will
and rack me with his measure,
effortless yet full of strength,
and slay me
in that most horrible contest,
still, how I envy you your chance.

Though he pierce me—imperious—
iron—fever—dust—

though beauty is slain
when I perish,
I envy you death.

What is beauty to me?
has she not slain me enough,
have I not cried in agony of love,
birth, hate,
in pride crushed?

What is left after this?
what can death loose in me
after your embrace?
your touch,
your limbs are more terrible
to do me hurt.

What can death mar in me
that you have not?

2

What can death send me
that you have not?
you gathered violets,
you spoke:
"your hair is not less black,
nor less fragrant,
nor in your eyes is less light,

your hair is not less sweet
with purple in the lift of lock;"
why were those slight words
and the violets you gathered
of such worth?

How I envy you death;
what could death bring,
more black, more set with sparks
to slay, to affright,
than the memory of those first violets,
the chance lift of your voice,
the chance blinding frenzy
as you bent?

3

So the goddess has slain me
for your chance smile
and my scarf unfolding
as you stooped to it;
so she trapped me
with the upward sweep of your arm
as you lifted the veil,
and the swift smile and selfless.

Could I have known?
nay, spare pity,
though I break,

crushed under the goddess' hate,
though I fall beaten at last,
so high have I thrust my glance
up into her presence.

Do not pity me, spare that,
but how I envy you
your chance of death.

LETHE

Nor skin nor hide nor fleece
Shall cover you,
Nor curtain of crimson nor fine
Shelter of cedar-wood be over you,
Nor the fir-tree
Nor the pine.

Nor sight of whin nor gorse
Nor river-yew,
Nor fragrance of flowering bush,
Nor wailing of reed-bird to waken you,
Nor of linnet,
Nor of thrush.

Nor word nor touch nor sight
Of lover, you
Shall long through the night but for this:
The roll of the full tide to cover you
Without question,
Without kiss.

CHARIOTEER

In that manner (archaic) he finished the statue of his brother. It stands mid-way in the hall of laurels . . . between the Siphnians' offering and the famous tripod of Naxos.

ONLY the priest
of the inmost house
has such height,
only the faun
in the glade
such light, strong ankles,
only the shade of the bay-tree
such rare dark
as the darkness
caught under the fillet
that covers your brow,
only the blade
of the ash-tree
such length, such beauty
as thou,
O my brother;
and only the gods
have such love

as I bring you;
but now,
taut with love,
more than any bright lover,
I vowed
to the innermost
god of the temple,
this vow.

God of beauty, I cried,
as the four stood alert,
awaiting the shout
at the goal
to be off;
god of beauty,
I cried to that god,
if he merit the laurel,
I dedicate all of my soul
to you; to you
all my strength and my power;
if he merit the bay,
I will fashion a statue
of him, of my brother,
out of thought,
and the strength of my wrist
and the fire of my brain;
I will strive night and day
till I mould from the clay,
till I strike from the bronze,

till I conjure the rock,
the chisel, the tool,
to embody this image;
an image to startle,
to capture men's hearts,
to make all other bronze,
all art to come after,
a mock,
all beauty to follow,
a shell that is empty;
I'll stake all my soul
on that beauty,
till God shall awake
again in men's hearts,
who have said he is dead,
our King and our Lover.

Then the start,
ah the sight,
ah but dim, veiled with tears,
(so Achilles must weep
who finds his friend dead,)
will he win?
then the ring of the steel
as two met at the goal,
entangled and foul,
misplaced at the start,
who, who blunders? not you?
what omens are set?

alas, gods of the track,
what ill wreaks its hate,
speak it clear,
let me know
what evil, what fate?
for the ring of sharp steel
told two were in peril,
two, two, one is you,
already involved
with the fears of defeat;
two grazed;
which must go?

As the wind,
Althaia's beauty came;
as one after a cruel march,
catches sight,
toward the cold dusk,
of the flower
that's her name-sake,
strayed apart
toward the road-dust,
from the stream
in the wood-depth,
so I in that darkness,
my mouth bitter
with sheer loss,
took courage,
my heart spoke,

remembering how she spoke:
"I will seek hour by hour
fresh cones, resin
and pine-flowers,
flower of pine,
laurel flower;
I will pray:
'let him come
back to us,
to our home,
with the trophy of zeal,
with the love and the proof
of the favour of god;
let him merit the bay.'
(I expect it,)

I myself on earth pray
that our father may pray;
his voice nearer the gods
must carry beyond
my mere mortal prayer:
'O my father beyond,
look down and be proud,
ask this thing
that we win,
ask it straight of the gods.' "

Was he glad,
did he know?
for the strength

of his prayer and her prayer
met me now
in one flame,
all my head, all my brow
was one flame,
taut and beaten
and faintly aglow,
as the wine-cup
encrusted and beaten and fine
with the pattern of leaves,
(so my brow,)
yet metallic and cool,
as the gold of the frigid metal
that circles the heat
of the wine.

Then the axel-tree cleft,
not ours, gods be blest;
now but three of you left,
three alert and abreast,
three—one streak of what fire?
three straight for the goal:
ah defeat,
ah despair,
still fate tricked our mares,
for they swerved,
flanks quivering and wet,
as the wind
at the mid-stretch

caught and fluttered a white scarf;
a veil shivering,
only the fluttering
of a white band,
yet unnerved and champing,
they turned,
(only knowing the swards of Achæa)
and he, O my love,
that stranger,
his stallions
stark frenzied and black,
had taken the inmost course,
overtook,
overcame,
overleapt,
and crowded you back.

O those horses
we loved and we prized;
I had gathered Alea mint
and soft branch
of the vine-stock in flower,
I had stroked Elaphia;
as one prays to a woman
"be kind,"
I had prayed Daphnaia;
I had threatened Orea
for her trick
of out-pacing the three,

even these,
I had almost despaired
at her fleet, proud pace,
O the four,
O swift mares of Achæa.

Should I pray them again?
or the gods of the track?
or Althaia at home?
or our father who died for Achæa?
or our fathers beyond
who had vanquished the east?
should I threaten or pray?

The sun struck the ridge of white marble
before me:
white sun on white marble
was black:
the day was of ash,
blind, unrepentant, despoiled,
my soul cursed the race and the track,
you had lost.

You, lost at the last?

Ah fools,
so you threatened to win?
ah fools,
so you knew my brother?
Greeks all,

all crafty and feckless,
even so, had you guessed
what ran in his veins and mine,
what blood of Achæa,
had you dared,
dared enter the contest,
dared aspire with the rest?

You had gained,
you outleapt them;
a sudden, swift lift of the reins,
a sudden, swift, taut grip of the reins,
as suddenly loosed,
you had gained.

When death comes
I will see
no vision of after,
(as some count
there may be an hereafter,)
no thought of old lover,
no girl, no woman,
neither mother,
nor yet my father
who died for Achæa,
neither God with the harp
and the sun on His brow,
but thou,
O my brother.

When death comes,
instead of a vision,
(I will catch it in bronze)
you will stand
as you stood at the end,
(as the herald announced it,
proclaiming aloud,
"Achæa has won,")
in-reining them now,
so quiet,
not turning to answer
the shout of the crowd.

THE LOOK-OUT

BETTER the wind, the sea, the salt
in your eyes,
than this, this, this.

You grumble and sweat;
my ears are acute
to catch your complaint,
almost the sea's roar is less
than your constant threat
of "back and back to the shore,
and let us rest."

You grumble and curse your luck
and I hear:
"O Lynceus,
aloft by the prow,
his head on his arms,
his eyes half closed,
almost asleep,
to watch for a rock,
(and hardly ever we need
his 'to left' or 'to right')

let Lynceus have my part,
let me rest like Lynceus."

"Rest like Lynceus!"
I'd change my fate for yours,
the very least,
I'd take an oar with the rest.

"Like Lynceus,"
as if my lot were the best.

O God, if I could speak,
if I could taunt the lot
of the wretched crew,
with my fate, my work.

But I may not,
I may not tell
of the forms that pass and pass,
of that constant old, old face
that leaps from each wave
to wait underneath the boat
in the hope that at last she's lost.

Could I speak,
I would tell of great mountains
that flow, great weeds
that float and float
to tangle our oars

if I fail "to left, to right;"
where the dolphin leaps
you saw a sign from the god,
I saw why he leapt from the deep.

"To right, to left;"
it is easy enough
to lean on the prow, half asleep,
and you think,
"no work for Lynceus."
No work?

If only you'd let me take an oar,
if only my back could break with the hurt,
if the sun could blister my feet,
pain, pain that I might forget
the face that just this moment
passed through the prow
when you said, "asleep."

Many and many a sight
if I could speak,
many and many tales I'd tell,
many and many a struggle,
many a death,
many and many my hurts
and my pain so great,
I'd gladly die
if I did not love the quest.

Grumble and swear and curse,
brother, god and the boat,
and the great waves,
but could you guess
what strange terror lurks in the sea-depth,
you'd thank the gods for the ship,
the timber and giant oars, god-like,
and the god-like quest.

If you could see as I,
what lurks in the sea-depth,
you'd pray to the ropes
and the solid timbers
like god, like god;

you'd pray to the oars and your work,
you'd pray and thank
the boat for her very self;
timber and oar and plank
and sail and the sail-ropes,
these are beautiful things and great.

But Lynceus at the prow
has nothing to do but wait
till we reach a shoal or some rocks
and then he has only to lift his arms,
right, left;
O brother,
I'd change my place

for the worst seat
in the cramped bench,
for an oar, for an hour's toil,
for sweat and the solid floor.

I'd change my place
as I sit with eyes half closed,
if only I could see just the ring
cut by the boat,
if only I could see just the water,
the crest and the broken crest,
the bit of weed that rises on the crest,
the dolphin only when he leaps.

But Lynceus,
though they cannot guess
the hurt, though they do not thank
the oars for the dead peace
of heart and brain worn out,
you must wait,
alert, alert, alert.

From the Masque

HYACINTH

I

YOUR anger charms me,
and yet all the time
I think of chaste, slight hands,
veined snow;
snow craters filled
with first wild-flowerlets;
glow of ice-gentian,
whitest violet;
snow craters
and the ice ridge
spilling light;
dawn and the lover
chaste dawn leaves bereft—
I think of these
and snow-cooled Phrygian wine.

Your anger charms me subtly
and I know
that you would take
the still hands

where I'd rest;
you would despoil
for very joy of theft;
list, lady,
I would give you one last hint:
quench your red mouth
in some cold forest lake,
cover your russet locks
with arum leaf,
quench out the colour,
still the fevered glance,
cover your want,
your fire insatiate,
I can not match your fervour,
nay, nor still my ache
with any
but white hands inviolate.

2

Take the red spoil
of grape and pomegranate,
the red camellia,
the most, most red rose;
take all the garden spills,
inveterate,
prodigal spender
just as summer goes,
the red scales of the deep in-folded spice,

the Indian, Persian and the Syrian pink,
their scent undaunted
even in that faint,
unmistakable fragrance
of the late tuberose,
(heavy its petals,
eye-lids of dark eyes
that open languorous
and more languorous close—the east,
further than scent
of our wind-smitten isle,)
take these:

O lady, take them,
prodigal
I cull and offer this and this and these
last definite whorls
of clustered peonies,
the last, the first
that stained our stainless ledge
of blue and white
and the white foam of sea,
rocks,
and that strait ledge
whiter than the rock
the Parians break
from their enchanted hill;
take, lady,
but leave me with my weed and shell

and those slight, hovering gull-wings that
recall
silver of far Hymettus' asphodel.

3

Take all
for you have taken everything,
but do not let me see you taking this;
Adonis lying spent with Venus' care,
Adonis dying were a lesser ache
than this,
to have even your slightest breath
breathe in the crystal air
where he takes breath.

Take all
for you have taken everything,
save the broad ledge of sea
which no man takes,
take all
for you have taken mirth and ease
and all the small delights
of simple poets,
the lilt of rhyme,
the sway and lift and fall,
the first spring gold
your fire has scorched to ash,
the fresh winds

that go halt
where you have passed,
the Tyrian iris
I so greatly loved,
its dark head speared
through its wet spray of leaves.

Take all,
but ah, lady, a fool, a poet
may even know when you have taken all:
up on the mountain slope
one last flower cleaves
to the wet marge of ice,
the blue of snow,
keep all your riot
in the swales below,
of grape and autumn,
take all, taking these,
for you and autumn yet
can not prevail
against that flame, that flower,
(ice, spark or jewel,)
the cyclamen,
parting its white cyclamen leaves.

4

O, I am ill with dust
as you with stain,

O, I am worthless,
weary, world-bedraggled,
nevertheless to mountains
still the rain
falls on the tangle
of dead under-brush,
freshens the loam,
the earth and broken leaves
for that hoar-frost
of later star or flower,
the fragile host
of Greek anemones.

Say I am little meet
to call the youth,
say I have little magic
to enchant,
but is that reason
why your flaring will
should sweep and scorch,
should lap and seethe and fill
with last red flame
the tender ditch and runnel
which the spring freshet
soon must fill again?

White violets
have no place
on your hot brow;

how can I bring you
what the spring must bring?
what can I offer?
lush and heady mallow?
the fire-grass
or the serpent-spotted
fire-flower?
O take them,
for I stand a ruinous cloud
between you
and the chaste uplifted hill.

O take them swiftly
and more swiftly go,
for spring is distant yet,
for spring is far;
you have your tense, short space
of blazing sun,
your melons, vines,
your terraces of fruit;
now all you have,
all, all I gladly give
who long but for the ridge,
the crest and hollow,
the lift and fall,
the reach and distant ledge
of the sun-smitten,
wind-indented snow.

The bird-choros of

ION

Birds from Parnassus,
swift
you dart
from the loftiest peaks;
you hover, dip,
you sway and perch
undaunted on the gold-set cornice;
you eagle,
god's majestic legate,
who tear, who strike
song-birds in mid-flight,
my arrow whistles toward you,
swift
be off;

ah drift,
ah drift
so soft, so light,
your scarlet foot so deftly placed
to waft you neatly
to the pavement,

swan, swan
and do you really think
your song
that tunes the harp of Helios,
will save you
from the arrow-flight?
turn back,
back
to the lake of Delos;

lest all the song notes
pause and break
across a blood-stained throat
gone songless,
turn back,
back
ere it be too late,
to wave-swept Delos.

Alas, and still another,
what?
you'd place your mean nest
in the cornice?
sing, sing
my arrow-string,
tell to the thief
that plaits its house
for fledglings
in the god's own house,

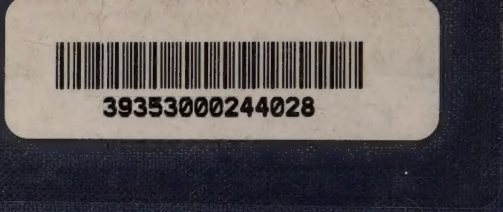
that still the Alpheus
whispers sweet
to lure
the birdlets to the place,
that still the Isthmus
shines with forests;
on the white statues
must be found
no straw nor litter
of bird-down,
Phœbus must have his portal fair;

and yet, O birds,
though this my labour
is set,
though this my task is clear,
though I must slay you,
I, god's servant,
I who take here
my bread and life
and sweep the temple,
still I swear
that I would save you,
birds or spirits,
winged songs
that tell to men god's will;

still, still
the Alpheus whispers clear

to lure the bird-folk
to its waters,
ah still
the Isthmus
blossoms fair;
lest all the song notes
pause and break
across a blood-stained throat
gone songless,
turn back,
back
ere it be too late,
to wave-swept Delos.

THE END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